

THE SCREAMING PEOPLE

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JANUARY, 1959

FANTASTIC

VOLUME 8 NO. 1

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fantastic

JANUARY 1959

Volume 8 Number 1

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NOVELETS

THE SCREAMING PEOPLE

By Robert Bloch..... 8

THE TROONS OF SPACE

Mars A. D. 2094

By John Wyndham..... 45

PASSAGE TO GOMORRAH

By Robert F. Young..... 83

SHORT STORIES

REPLACE THE HORSE

By Larry M. Harris..... 75

LAST LAUGHTER

By Robert Chase..... 106

FISH TALK

By Winston K. Marks..... 113

NOTHING BUT TERROR

By J. F. Bone..... 121

FEATURES

EDITORIAL..... 5

ACCORDING TO YOU..... 7



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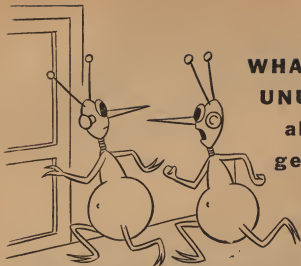
Doing a little homework the other day, we were browsing through some back issues of those two never-to-be-forgotten great magazines in the fantasy field—*Weird Tales* and *Unknown*, now both unfortunately defunct. (It is pleasant to imagine that *Unknown* is perhaps existing in some impossible but strictly logical un-world in non-space; and that *Weird* is comfortably at rest in a mouldering coffin in some unhallowed ground, with a few choice and hungry rats to keep it company.)

There were giants in the field, in those days! And the odd part of things is that, while science-fiction has improved and attracted brilliant new writers by the satellite-full, fantasy has not. Some of the old masters still practice the black art; and some new ones have graduated with highest honors. But where are the successors to Lovecraft, Machen, Poe and Bierce?

In recent years there has been, I fear, a growing tendency to be embarrassed about fantasy—as if it had no place in the world of real things. (Yet the world of real things, today, is incredibly fantastic!) And the literature of fantasy has suffered. It has been prostituted variously to coyness, cuteness, gothic-ness; it has sometimes sneaked around in the guise of science-fiction in hope of being accepted as “just one of the boys,” instead of as “the queer one.”

Well, it is my feeling that it is about time for fantasy to come right out and stand up on its own two feet (or three or five, if necessary). And it also is my feeling that a magazine which honestly tried to give its readers unabashed fantasy—well-conceived and well-written—would be met with glad huzzas by hordes of readers.

We'd like to try to do just that in future issues of *Fantastic*—if you agree. May we have your opinions?—NL



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ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

Dear Editor:

The October issue was great. I enjoyed "Suicide World" particularly. It would make a good movie.

I voted for fact articles in the questionnaire. "The Voodoo Queen of New Orleans" and "Shadows Over the White House" are certainly fantastic enough.

W. C. Brandt
1725 Seminary Avenue
Oakland 21, Calif.

• *Ok, Darryl, do you hear the man?*

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on a fine, enjoyable publication. I believe that you supply the most desirable short stories and novelettes I have ever read.

I was interested in the letter from Ed Doerr in the October issue. He expounded his disfavor with science fiction as it exists today very eloquently. Of course I am in harmonious agreement with his basic message. Science fiction and science are definitely not to be confused with each other. However, I would never agree to expressing my opinion in the method he employed.

Even the advanced science of today will eventually have to bow to the yet undiscovered facts of tomorrow. History is a book with many unwritten chapters left for humanity to fill. I believe even Mr. Hermann J. Muller, "world famous Nobel Prize geneticist and a science fiction fan . . ." would agree with this.

Mr. Doerr unnecessarily uses words like "paleontological, pseudoscience, metaphysical, etc.," to express his personal opinion. It would be much easier on his vocabulary and considerably less difficult for common understanding if he would just state that he doesn't care for science fiction. And if this is the case, I am not aware of any laws which make the reading of science fiction mandatory.

(Continued on page 119)

Stephen lived in a world of agony—always fearful that he, too, would become one of

THE SCREAMING PEOPLE

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

IT BEGINS in darkness.

They call it sleep, but it's only a darkness. I lie there curled in the womb-posture and the darkness is all around me. When sleep comes, I merely draw some of that darkness inside me; the warm, rich, all-encompassing darkness, the darkness that is the nourishing blood of the night.

Womb-posture. A fetus lacks awareness, but I know that I'm asleep. I like to sleep.

"Take it easy. Rest, relax. Get plenty of sleep." That's what the doctors told me. And I'm willing to follow orders.

Roxie tells me I'm lazy, but I don't care; not if she lets me



"He had wound her
the ends tight,



hair about her throat and now he was pulling strangling her in a scarlet noose."

sleep. Not if she lets me go into the darkness, where I can be alone.

I'm alone now. I don't even have to think about the necessity of sleep any more. I'm safe. No one can get to me, not even myself. *Not even myself.* That's very important, somehow. I'm really alone, the way I want to be.

Better than that, I can burrow so deeply down into the darkness that I lose myself completely. There is no *me*, there's nothing but night.

Night—and the Voice.

I have to call it that, although it really isn't a Voice—I don't hear it, merely *sense* its presence. It exists, suddenly, somewhere in the darkness around me.

It emerges as a buzzing which I cannot locate in time or space. Does it impinge upon me from far away or is it whispering beside my ear?

"It doesn't matter."

The Voice tells me that. And I realize this is true. It *doesn't* matter where the Voice comes from. It's a part of the darkness. I need the darkness around me, so I must accept the Voice.

Then it grows.

Maybe the Voice feeds on darkness too, because it expands immediately until everything else is blotted out.

Even the darkness is engulfed by the Voice. The Voice, speaking to me, telling me what I must do if I want to go back into the dark.

"Get up. Get dressed. Go to Hexler's."

I'm asleep. I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to go anywhere. And I've never heard of Hexler's.

But the Voice realizes all that. It understands. And it tells me I have to go.

"Get up. Get dressed. Go to Hexler's." Over and over again. I try to escape from it, into the darkness, but the darkness is gone now. There's only the Voice, telling me what I must do. In order to retreat into the safety of the dark again, I have to obey. There's no question of refusal. If I refuse, I'll stay here forever, listening to the Voice and I don't want to do that.

So it's easier to do as I'm told. The Voice will direct me. All I need do is listen and accept, and the Voice will lead me back into the darkness. The Voice knows the way.

Everything is so simple. I'm not conscious of awakening but I know—a part of me knows—that I've left the bed. No need for lights; I can find my clothing in the dark, without even opening my eyes. I

can dress in the dark, quickly and quietly. The Voice anticipates everything.

But where's the door? If I could only open my eyes—

"Very well. Open your eyes."

That's better. I can go now. But where?

"Hexler's. Hexler's house."

So it's a house.

"James P. Hexler. 100 North Azure Drive."

The Voice will guide me; the Voice will never fail, because it knows. I can trust it, I must trust it. There's something familiar about the Voice. "His Master's Voice." Funny, that should come into my head. Records. I'm in the transcription game myself.

Mustn't think about that, though. Must concentrate on what the Voice is telling me. I'm getting instructions now.

"Walk quietly."

I open the door, tiptoe into the hall, close the door behind me. The Voice anticipates every movement.

And then I'm out on the street, alone in the night. Alone, yet not alone. Because the Voice is with me.

"Turn west."

The wind angers the grass. I gaze up at the ancient, evil world of the moon. It radiates an orange aura of corruption.

"North, into the canyon."

On steeply-sloping hills, the trees bow and beckon before me. Huddled behind them, strange houses squat, blinded by night.

"Enter the fifth driveway."

The hill is high, the path uncertain.

"Climb."

Why couldn't I have come around the front, where the walk leads to a gate?

"Climb!"

I climb the hill, and then the wall is before me; the high stone wall ringing the hilltop. I pause, uncertain.

"Climb!"

My fingers claw, my knees lock, my back arches. But somehow there is no pain. The Voice protects and directs. My forehead is wet and an engine throbs in my chest. But I'm straddling the top of the wall, gazing down through the trees at the dark house on the hilltop.

"Jump!"

I float on the wind. The falling dream. My ankles are wrapped in cotton batting as I land. No, that's illusion. I must remember to be careful of illusions. I must remember that the Voice alone is real. There is nothing but the Voice and the will to obey it.

Now I must walk towards the house, approaching it

from the rear. I must stay within the shadows of the trees, where the moon's rays are barred by branches. Where I remain in the shadows.

The house of stone is huge; a mansion, built in the days when men thought of such edifices as mansions. The myriad heads of its cupolas are gray, silvered by the touch of time and moonlight. Myriad heads and one body—a hydra-house.

Why do I think of that? I don't think in such terms. But the Voice does. The Voice is thinking for me. The night holds no secrets for the Voice. All I need do is listen and obey.

"Look for the open window."

Yes, look for the open window. Look for the silver lining. Look for the bluebird. That's *my* voice now, *my* thought. Or am I just remembering something that was already told to me, a long time ago?

A long time ago I was in bed, asleep. Maybe I'm still asleep. Maybe I'm just dreaming.

"The open window—"

The Voice doesn't want me to wonder about such things. The Voice is telling me that somewhere along this side of

the house there is a window, open and waiting.

Yes. I can see it. The sill is low. I can reach it, climb over it. That's what I'm supposed to do. And I must be quiet, exceedingly quiet. Yes, I hear, I know.

But it's dark. If I had my lighter—

"No light."

Of course. No light. I can stand here until my eyes grow accustomed to the dimness. Carrots for night vision. Night vision—a vision born of the night. Stand in the strange house now and try to see.

There's a musty odor in this room, a museum smell. I stand quietly, breathe softly, because no one must know I'm here.

I am a stranger and afraid, in a house I never made.

I blink at the sudden light. Is there somebody outside? No, it's only the moon shining through the trees as it rises. I can see now.

The long room is like a museum hall, lined with cases. I start down it.

The Voice guides me. Watch out for creaking floorboards. Don't bump against the glass. Breathe slowly, quietly.

Behind the glass I see figurines, pottery, vases, horses.

Chinese art—Ming, Sung, Han, Tang. I don't know my dynasties. Big Kwan Yin. Foo dogs. A Ho-Ti in the milky perfection of jade. That's valuable, the jade. Tao—

"Go to the stairs."

The staircase is around the corner, in the outer hallway. There are other rooms opening off the hall, containing more glass cases. A fortune in the stuff. Hexler must be filthy rich.

"Move slowly."

I must climb the stairs. They creak, so easy does it. One step at a time. And now where?

"The third door on the left."

It's darker here in the upper hall, because all the doors are closed. One, two, three. Here.

Now, open the door. Open it just a trifle, as the Voice directs. There's moonlight streaming through the window and I can see.

I'm standing in a bedroom, a vast bedroom. The high, canopied bed in the corner is a million miles away. Its curtains waver slowly in the breeze from the open window, billowing back and forth like batwings flapping in the dark. The bed is a huge beast, crouching over its prey—

I walk silently, threading a

path through the tables lining the long room. There are bell-jars on the tables, with more jade beneath them. Jade and ebony and ivory. There's a jackal-headed figure beneath one jar. That would be Anubis, the Opener of the Way. Who opened the way for me?

And what's that sound . . . ?

I hear a tinkling. A tinkling in the moonlight, a faint clicking and clattering. Something is stirring in the breeze; the same breeze that ripples the short hairs rising along the nape of my neck.

Now I see it, on the table, next to the bed. There's a little silver skeleton, mounted on a pedestal.

I stare at it, but there's no mistake. It's a perfectly-fashioned miniature skeleton, completely articulated; a silver skeleton with ruby eyes, hinged and jointed and hung from a hook rising out of the pedestal's base.

No wonder it clicks and clatters. For the tiny figure is weaving with the wind, bobbing and grimacing in a dance of death.

Death.

I must get out of here. What am I doing? This is all wrong, I must—

"The window-seat. Open the window-seat."

The Voice commands, but I can't obey. I have to get away from this place.

"The window-seat. Just open it and take the box. Then you can go."

Yes. I could do that. I could do that, very quickly. Nobody will see me. Those little red eyes are only rubies. I can take it, fast, and then I can run.

The seat swings up. Funny, there was a lock here, I can see that, but it's broken now. I lift the seat. And here's the box. A black velvet box, long and shallow. I can hold it. I can hold it as I run down the hall—

"Go to the bed."

I don't want to go to the bed. I want to run. I'm *going* to run. Except that I can't move. All at once I'm back there in the desert, pinned underneath the car, and my arms and legs are paralyzed and I'm trying to get away from the pain in my head, trying to sink down into the darkness. That's why I need the darkness, still need it now; to get away from the memory, and the pain.

And the only way to find the darkness again is to let the Voice guide me. I must follow the Voice. That's the only way.

"Go to the bed."

I put the black case down on the table and walk over to the bed. It won't hurt to look. Even if the batwings flap, even if the tiny skeleton moves in its *dans macabre*, I can look. I can gaze through the parted curtains.

The room is a museum and I am staring down at a mummy. Gaunt, stiffened limbs, wrapped in the folds of the bedding. A bald, shrivelled skull. A face that is old and wrinkled and brown and dry. No bitumen seals the lips, so it cannot be a mummy; it must be a man. A very old man, sleeping in a canopy bed, sleeping the sleep of the aged which is like death. His chest neither rises nor falls. His tongue is limp in his open mouth. I can hear nothing but the faint clattering of the little silver skeleton.

There are deep pools of shadow covering the old man's eyes. I bend forward, peering into them. Surely there will be a ripple; the stone of my gaze must inevitably plumb those depths.

No ripple. No movement.

"Now."

The Voice is not speaking to me. It is talking to my hands.

They know what to do.

It's so simple, and there's

nothing to fear. Besides, the Voice will leave me if I obey. Then I can run away, then I can sleep, then I can go back into the darkness where there is neither Voice nor dreams nor memory of pain.

I have to sleep. It's the only sure way. The only sure way to banish silver skeletons and yawning corridors and mummies grinning up into endless darkness—

"Now."

Besides, *I* won't be doing it. Only my hands. My restless, moving hands.

"Find a pillow."

There is a pillow under the old man's head. There *was* a pillow.

Now it is above his head, over his face. My hands hold it there, until the eyes and the open mouth are blotted out. My hands press a whiteness into the darkness.

No sound. No movement. My hands press and press and my wrists ache, but the Voice wants to be sure, very sure.

A century later, I turn away and pick up the black case from the table. The moonlight is dimming and the darkness increases.

All at once the Voice is gone. There is only that insane jangling, that damnable clicking from the obscene little grotesque on the table.

My hands put a stop to the mummy-vision. I can end *this* torment, too.

I grasp the silver figure and hurl it to the floor. Let my feet put a stop to the skeleton-spectre. It's good to feel it crunch and splinter beneath my heel. See, *I* can dance too, now!

There, it's done. And I'm alone in the dark, at last. I must grope my way out of the room, ever so slowly. I must creep down the stairs, out of the house, back through the strangeness of the silent streets. But the Voice is gone and I shall sleep once more . . . untormented sleep.

I turn at the doorway for a last look. Blur of moonlight, swirl of shadows. And in the center of the room, the broken jumbled heap of tiny silver bones . . .

Somebody was poking me in the ribs. I opened my eyes.

Then I knew it was all right because I was in bed, in my own apartment, with the sunlight streaming through the blinds. I was back in the world of morning, and bacon-and-eggs, and Roxie.

Roxie was doing the poking, of course. Her slim arm extended from beneath the covers of the twin bed next to mine, as she jabbed the point-

ed, painted nail of her index finger against my pajamas.

I was wearing pajamas! How could that be? Had I undressed again and—?

A quick glance to my right showed my clothing hung neatly over the back the way Roxie always hung it for me. My jacket wasn't there. It would be in the closet. Roxie put it on a hanger before we went to bed.

Yes. Of course. It *had* to be that way.

"Wake up. What's the matter?"

Husky voice. I could remember the way she used it when she sang. No control, but the fire came through.

"What's wrong with you, Steve? Another nightmare?"

"Nightmare?"

"You've been tossing and turning and groaning like a—I don't know what." She laughed. "I had an awful time waking you up. She must have been pretty."

"That was no lady, that was something I ate." I sat up and grinned. It wasn't hard to do.

Roxie was something to grin at—something to whistle at, too. I never could understand what she saw in me, but there was no doubt about what I saw in her.

She was a beautiful red-

head. Repeat, beautiful. Because there are plenty of redheads *per se* (or *per henna*, for that matter) but very few worthy of that much-abused adjective. Generally speaking, every girl with orange hair or caramel-colored hair is, by courtesy, a redhead. But Roxie's hair, in ordinary light, was really *red*. And there was no accompanying dermatological disorder; no hint of freckles or blotches in the smooth skin.

I reached over and took her in my arms. Not a bad deal. But she kept one eye on the clock. Thirty-six seconds later she said, "Steve—time to get up. You'll be late."

I made a face at the clock, but I got up.

"Want me to fix breakfast, honey?" she called, as I started shaving.

"No, don't bother. I'll catch something downtown." I stared at my countenance in the mirror. There were sagging pouches under my eyes. And no wonder. That dream last night had been the worst. Worse than the reality of the night on the desert, the night I was pinned under the car; worse than the weeks that followed.

I really ought to tell Roxie about the dream, but not now. This evening, perhaps, when

I came home; then we could talk.

Right now the thing to do was to get down to the office. I had a job to hold, peddling one-minute commercials, twenty-second transcriptions, thirty-second recordings for station-breaks in a world of hard-sell which had nothing to do with last night's fantasy of dancing death. So it was time to face today's reality. Out, damned spot-announcement.

I adjusted my tie, picked up my coat, slung it over my arm, kissed Roxie good-bye at the door, and made my exit.

It wasn't until I was halfway down the stairs that I put my coat on, and I was actually striding through the foyer of the apartment lobby before I became conscious of the unaccustomed bulk inside the jacket.

That's when I pulled out the long, shallow, black velvet box. It was utterly empty, but utterly real.

And that, of course, is when the nightmare began again. Not in darkness, this time, but in broad daylight—the harsh, acrid, smog-obscured daylight of what, in Los Angeles, passes for reality.

So I didn't go to the office after all. I phoned them from

a public cubicle at the corner, and then I boarded a Sunset bus. That's right, a bus; everybody drives in L.A., but I'm the lone exception—have been, ever since that night out on the desert when the car rolled over.

Right now the car was rolling over again, and the little silver skeleton was jangling, and I wanted to run home to Roxie and bury myself in her arms. But you can't go home again, and you can't tell the woman you love that everything is a nightmare and she is only a part of it. You can't seek reality through a mother-substitute.

Dr. Wagram had made that perfectly clear. And that's why I had to go to him now.

I took the 91 bus not far from Angel's Flight and rode past the new County buildings on Hill. All the while I kept a tight grip on that damned black velvet box, because it was a part of reality now. I had to keep my grip on reality until I reached Dr. Wagram. He could explain things to me; there *must* be an explanation, and I wasn't going to start screaming right here in a public bus.

And I forced myself to stare out at Los Angeles, though that didn't reassure me very much. For fantasy is

reality out here. I gaped at a cordon of men who groped with canes against the searing sunlight as I passed the Braille Institute of America. I blinked while the weird figure in the Space Patrol helmet whizzed past on his police motorcycle. After the bus turned onto Sunset I noted the headquarters of the National Judo Association—and tried to picture what went on inside, with little success. No more than I obtained as I attempted to visualize how the TV dreams were being made in the studios at Sunset and Cahuenga.

If anything, that bus-ride was a continuation of flight and fugue. Why, I wondered, had they bothered to build a Disneyland out here, when every street-corner offered its own vista of escape? I turned my head to the left and saw Schwab's Pharmacy; turned it to the right and saw a Chinese pagoda towering high on the hillside; stared straight ahead at the palms of the Garden of Allah. And here was a midget roaring by, all alone in the enclosed immensity of an outsize imperial. Following him came Irish McCalla—Sheena of the Jungle, one of the tallest women in show business—crouched over

the wheel of her tiny copper-colored Volkswagon.

And now I climbed to the west, along the gaudy improbabilities of restaurant row—that Japanese place, and *Ciro's*, and the *Mocambo* and *Scandia*—all utterly unreal here in the sunlight because they were asleep, their painted faces and neon eyes closed against the glare of the day. Like vampires, they came alive only after dark, and maybe that's the secret; maybe these Strip restaurants *are* vampires. Or run for the benefit of vampires who venture forth only at night and who know the password and enter to drink blood from the crimson concealment of crystal goblets. And that would lend a certain sinister significance to the name of the street itself—*Sunset Boulevard*. Could there be any more appropriate designation for a thoroughfare peopled by the Undead?

I thought of some of the waxy, pallid faces I'd glimpsed in the night along this route; thought of the feral, feverish eyes, the too-bright, too-crimson lips pulled back from the white and gleaming teeth; thought of this army awaiting sunset on Sunset; awaiting it in crypts concealed beneath the big

houses up there in the canyons. They were waiting now, waiting for the sun to fade before they awoke to walk and drink their fill in a world of mist and moonlight and silver skeletons—

And then I was back in my nightmare again and I thought of the big house on the hillside, and the *other* big house I was searching for now.

I left the bus just in time and started running up the slope of the hill to my left, and it *was* a nightmare, it was just the way it had been in my dream, only this time no Voice prompted me. I knew where I was going, and why, and I didn't stop until I rounded the turn on the private entry-way and came to the stone arch on which was imbedded the neat little bronze plaque reading *Carl Wagram*.

I was sweating and panting, but I didn't slow down.

I started to run along the drive, towards the big doorway, and it was like running through water, or something thicker. *What is thicker than water?*

Blood.

Yes, I was running through blood, because everything was turning red.

My heart was pounding so

loudly I could hear it even through the black velvet of the box inside my jacket. And now it seemed as though I could hear other sounds, too. There was the tinkling of tiny silver bones, and a harsh grating noise which seemed to come from far beneath the surface of the earth. It's hollow and empty down there in the crypts, and even the echoes are monstrously magnified when the coffin-lids are opened from within and *they* come crawling out. They had heard my heart and that's why they were coming to get me, because they knew it was pumping blood and I was running through blood and they thirsted. Blood is redder than Roxie's hair, and if you're blind and groping through the redness with a cane you can't escape; even judo won't save you when they wrap their cold arms around you and drag you down into the darkness. I could hear them coming closer and closer, and there was only one way to shut out the sound.

I screamed.

I screamed as I stumbled up the steps, screamed as I beat upon the door, screamed as I fell into Dr. Wagram's waiting arms.

I was still screaming when

he put me back in the womb . . .

It was very pleasant in the womb.

I lay there for a long time, coiled up fetally (fatally?—no, there was nothing to be afraid of here) and stark naked. Naked as a newborn babe, naked as an *unborn* babe with only a gossamer covering of lanugo to protect it. But there was no need for protection because this was the womb. It was dark and it was red, and the walls were soft and moist and rubbery and there was a faint and far-off murmuring which soothed and sated me.

I wasn't afraid to think now, wasn't afraid to remember. Although I didn't have too much to recall. Here I was, back in the womb, yet my actual memories didn't extend back past my thirtieth birthday.

My thirtieth birthday—that was the night I'd rolled the car over.

That was the night I'd been driving to Vegas; at least they surmised it had been my destination, for why else would I be racing across the desert in an open convertible with four thousand dollars in cash in the glove-compartment?

That's the amount they

found when they found me—or, rather, when *he* found me. For it was Dr. Carl Wagram who, en route from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, pulled his car over to the side of the road and discovered me lying there in the ditch with half the convertible crushing my body. I'd suffered compound fractures of both arms and both legs, my skull had been smashed, and yet I was still able to scream. I must have been screaming for half an hour before he came along.

Even now—even here in the womb, where nothing could harm me—I still didn't care to dwell on what happened. Actually, it all came to me via second-hand report, because when Wagram arrived I slipped down into the merciful oblivion of concussion-induced coma. And there I stayed for the next ten days, while Wagram accompanied me to the nearest town, supervised the work of the doctor who put the casts on me, represented me in the police investigation which followed, and finally—after two surgeons flew out from L.A., examined my head injuries, and pronounced my condition hopeless and my brain-damage so extensive as to render the case inoperable—chartered a private plane and flew me

back to his own clinic here. Then *he* operated; Dr. Carl Wagram, who learned his neuro-surgery in war-torn Munich. He put the plates into my skull and my head healed and he grafted the skin and hair grew and there was even a touch of cosmetological miracle involved. By the time my casts were off, my physical recovery was assured.

This left me with but one problem.

Amnesia.

Complete and total amnesia.

Oh, I could comprehend consciousness, and I could even speak after a fashion. But I was unable to remember a single solitary moment of my life before that crash. Existence, for me, began with a scream of pain out there on the desert.

My name?

Stephen Edmundson, according to the driver's license and the registration of the crumpled car.

My address?

A motel, just south of Venice, in the Santa Monica area, which I'd occupied for just three weeks. And it was during those three weeks that I'd obtained both my license and the automobile. I'd paid cash for the latter, and the dealer at the used car lot had

a sketchy record and a vague recollection of my coming in and making the transaction. But that was all.

The motel proprietor knew nothing about me except that I'd showed up one afternoon, wearing a nondescript outfit and carrying a single piece of luggage. I had paid him in cash, too, and we had no further dealings except for my weekly settlement of the rent. Apparently I'd gone out, applied for a driver's license, took my tests—that was on record, too—and bought the second-hand convertible. In the meanwhile I'd lived quietly, unobtrusively, made no contacts and no friends.

Dr. Wagram investigated, of course, and so did the police. They didn't have much to go on. When I drove out of the motel I'd acquired new luggage and a complete new wardrobe, down to socks and handkerchiefs and underwear. They were able to find out where I'd bought some of it, but never learned what happened to my old clothing. Obviously, I'd discarded the lot.

So they checked the military authorities, but there was no record of any Stephen Edmundson in Service.

And they checked with the

FBI and they put out the usual bulletins and inquiries and tried to match fingerprints—without results.

No family claimed me, no friends stepped forward, no wife or children rushed to identify me. Nor was there any clue as to what I'd been doing holing up in a Venice motel with about seven thousand dollars in cash—or what I'd intended to do with the four thousand I had left when I took off in the general direction of Las Vegas.

I couldn't remember.

My mind couldn't remember and my body couldn't remember. Thirty years had been wiped out.

At first there was even the painful and embarrassing matter of re-learning the simple physiological habit-patterns governing ingestion and elimination. And, after the casts were removed, the business of learning to walk again. I was like a child; more accurately, like a newborn infant.

And that, I suppose, is why Dr. Wagram put me in the womb.

I knew where Wagram picked up his neuropsychiatric techniques, but never did discover where he'd acquired his theories. And even after

I'd regained a certain measure of comprehension, a certain vocabulary which extended my frame of reference, I was unable to obtain satisfaction in the matter.

"There's no point in explaining," Wagram told me. The short, plump, balding little man regarded me with enigmatic eyes. "Poor Reich tried to explain about the orgone, and they laughed at him. Moreno's psychodrama techniques haven't won general acceptance. Even Jung has had trouble with his theories about the use of the *mandala*. The innovator, the unorthodox practitioner, had best be silent and let his work speak for itself, in terms of results.

"I will say only this. Out of trauma comes fugue, out of fugue comes the retreat to the womb. Many psychotherapists attempt to block this retreat. As the record attests, few succeed. So I have chosen another course. The patient seeks the safety and comfort of the womb? Very well, I will give it to him. I have built a womb, where he is safe and secure, where he can find rest and reassurance. When the time comes that life stirs anew within him, when he desires to be born again, he and I together will weave

an umbilical cord of words—a cord of dependency which will be snapped only when the moment of psychic rebirth arrives.

"The orthodox analyst becomes a father-image. I extend that; I become the mother-image as well. And the womb serves. It has served others amongst my patients; it will serve you."

And it did.

Since that time I've heard it argued, by reputable psychotherapists, that the gaudy little room which Dr. Wagram set up as an artificial womb is a ridiculous concept, a charlatan conceit.

But it worked, for me.

It saved my life. It *gave* me a life, in place of the one I'd lost when memory melted away there in the desert.

There came a time when I could talk again, when I could reason again. And when I could feel emotion.

I never did manage to recover a knowledge of what had gone before. The past was not recaptured and I learned to accept Thomas Wolfe's bitter dictum—you can't go home again. But there were clues.

Wagram may have been an unorthodox practitioner, but he didn't scorn the use of

orthodox methodology when the situation indicated its employment. I took batteries of the usual tests, and Wagram probed with depth techniques, free association and all the rest. There were clues in my reactions—indications of learned responses.

Somewhere in my past I'd acquired the equivalent of a college education, plus a variety of motor and manual skills which reflected practical experience. Perhaps I'd been in the Merchant Marine for a while (though again a search of the records gave no confirmation). I'd lived in a colder climate for a time; I was familiar with the operation of a typewriter; I'd enjoyed sports. But all these things were haphazard inferences at best, and they afforded little reassurance.

I couldn't stay in the womb forever. And I couldn't stay at Wagram's clinic forever. The time was coming when I must go back into the world—a world I never knew, and that didn't know me.

I had no family, no friends, no ties of any sort. And I had no money, either. The cash had gone; mainly to the doctors and the officials, and only a surprisingly small sum to Wagram, who refused to even entertain the notion of future

indebtedness. In fact, he insisted that I take six hundred dollars with me when I left his place.

"The data afforded me in connection with your case is invaluable," he told me. "I consider the time and effort spent on you to be a sound investment which will bring me ample returns in the future."

Wagram was wonderful. It was he who found me a place to live, pulled strings to get me my first sales job. From that, after a few months of orientation—during which I kept coming back to him for reassurance whenever necessary—I finally stepped into my present position with the transcription agency. And that's where I'd met Roxie.

She'd come in, one day, with an agent, a Ben Clermer. He was one of those hearty, gregarious boys, a tactile tactician—continually patting you on the back, holding your arm while he talked to you. He pawed every woman he met. It was a compulsion, really. He couldn't help putting his hands on you, digging you in the ribs, going through all the motions employed by a successful pickpocket.

But I don't like pickpockets, and I didn't much care for Ben Clermer; particularly

when I saw him pawing Roxie.

That's when I knew I was falling in love with her—when I began to resent his familiarity.

They came in several times; Roxie was hoping to get a job belting out singing commercials. Unfortunately, she didn't have the voice for it. Those husky, untrained tones just didn't lend themselves to cooing over the delights of a liquid detergent. And she lacked the disciplined projection necessary for a career as a straight singer. Roxie had, I learned, knocked around the fringes of show biz for a number of years; she'd been a nitery chorine in her teens, done bits in strawhat stock, even had a season as assistant to a carney magician. She'd started out at fifteen as a beautiful redhead, and she ended up, at twenty-three, as a beautiful redhead.

Somewhere along the line there had been a brief, unsuccessful marriage and any number of brief, unsuccessful liaisons. I never asked her about the past—I'd learned to be pretty sensitive myself about this. But I did, eventually, broach the matter of her future.

"I don't know what Clermer has told you," I said.

"But I can imagine. He keeps giving you the buildup, doesn't he? Well, in a way, I don't blame him. You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. I believe that's how it goes."

"That's a left-handed compliment if I ever heard one," Roxie answered.

"I'm a left-handed guy. And right now I'm not interested in feeding you compliments. I want to give you a taste of the truth."

"Which is—?"

"You can't sing. You dance well enough for the second line, but in another couple of years you'll be too old for chorus work. Your speaking-voice is fair, but you'd need a lot of training if you ever hoped to make it in radio or TV as an actress. It would take time and money, and let's face it—you haven't too much of either."

"What are you suggesting, then?" she asked me. "Could be you're out shilling for some Business College?"

"That's a possibility," I said. "But frankly, it hadn't occurred to me. I was going to give you a bit of more obvious advice. The same advice you get from your mirror every morning."

"Which is?"

"Get married."

She made a face. "Clermer's already married."

"He's not the only man in the world."

"I know. But a girl has to wait until she's asked."

"Consider yourself asked, then."

"Steve—"

"I make a hundred and a quarter a week here, average. Sometimes up to a hundred and fifty, if the commissions go good and the residuals pay off. I don't have anything much put aside in the bank, but I've no obligations either. No family, no other responsibilities. We could find an apartment. You wouldn't have to just sit around all day, you know—suppose you did want to take a little coaching, learn a bit about acting? There'd be the time and the money for that. And when you're set, I could see about making some contacts for you. I may not be an agent, but I've got a few connections in the field. How does that sound to you?"

"Pretty good, as far as it goes. But there's one little part you left out. Something about love and—"

"Roxie!" I said that part then, with my arms around her; said it and meant it and felt it. And I hadn't stopped saying it and meaning it and

feeling it during the past year we'd been together.

Of course I'd asked Dr. Wagram, first. We had a long talk about marriage and its risks—particularly as they might apply to someone in my rather unusual position and circumstances. He hadn't been too encouraging.

But I didn't need encouragement at the time. I needed Roxie. And for a while she took the place of any continuing therapy: It wasn't for many months that I went back to Dr. Wagram's clinic.

When I went, Roxie wasn't involved. In fact, she didn't even know. She had met Wagram, of course, once or twice during the early months of our marriage. I'd told her a bit about my past—or lack of one, rather—and of what Wagram had done for me. She hadn't pried or probed, merely accepted my story as she accepted me. And as I accepted her. For my own part, I never spoke to her of her earlier years. Even though she could remember them, I sensed that there was much unhappiness in that area, and I avoided it; just as I avoided my own earliest memories of lying under that car and screaming my mind away into the echoing night.

The trouble was, I couldn't

avoid such recurrent recall completely, not even in Roxie's arms. And so the time came when I went back to Wagram—and even to the womb.

I did a little reading about amnesia, and what I learned bothered me. "There must be something I'm afraid to face, something pretty awful," I told him. "Surely by this time I should have a gradual return of memory. Partial recollection ought to be triggered in, at least. Couldn't you try some more word-association techniques? And what about hypnoanalysis, narcohypnosis, or—"

Wagram waved my suggestions aside. He was never a violent man, always a quiet one, but his mere casualness carried weight.

"I've not found it necessary to discuss my other work here at the clinic, Steve," he told me. "The work which supports all of my research, all of my independent investigations, my staff. You met Dr. Bittner, of course, and Dr. Corelli. But did you know that I have four more internists on the payroll, and three full-time nurses? Do you realize that at no time are there less than a dozen patients here, plus the others that I see regularly by appointment?"

"Well, it's true. This is a big house, Steve. Big, and soundproofed. You've never been on the soundproofed side, have you? And I've no intention of taking you there now. You wouldn't want to meet the screaming people."

"Screaming people?"

Wagram shrugged. "Not a very flattering description, but a most accurate one. You see, that is the chief source of my livelihood here—the screaming people. The so-called incurables, the hopelessly psychotic. I've specialized in their care since I came here to the Coast after the war. I've deliberately taken on the cases which were given up as hopeless; the men and women whose only remaining alternatives are confinement in a public or a private institution for life. To be utterly blunt, they are given a choice including a private institution like this only if they or their families have a great deal of money. I need a great deal of money in order to advance my own therapeutic techniques, and I've had no compunctions about obtaining it from them. Because, in return, I've been able to stop the screaming."

"You've cured the incurables?"

Dr. Wagram shrugged

again. "Remember what the doctors decided in your case? You were to die. But neurosurgery—"

"Yes," I admitted. "Neurosurgery. You saved me. But with physical techniques, here in your own operating-room. What can you do for the psychotics?"

"I can do what all the others do," Wagram answered. "I can give them what you're asking me to give you, now. Free association, depth-analysis, narcohypnotic sessions. But these people are beyond the scope of such treatment. Their only hope lies in drastic therapy—new techniques. I have evolved many. The womb, here, is one. Another is my sadomasochistic ampitheatre, where acts of violent aggression can be carried out upon the persons of lifelike, even partially animated mannikins. Sexual repressions can be similarly discharged—but I've no intention of giving a lecture.

"It is enough for me to say that in most instances, something even more extreme is required.

"Here, let me put it this way. I will simplify, even oversimplify. The source of aberration lies in the past. The past lies in the memory-banks. Eliminate the mem-

ory-banks and you eliminate the source of aberration. There is no trauma, no guilt, no compulsion, when you remove the past; when you excise it surgically, completely.

"The brain has often been compared to a sponge, and so it is. Squeeze this gray sponge, squeeze it dry of all unpleasant memories of the past, and it can be filled again.

"I've learned how to drain the memories, using my own surgical techniques—call it a combination of lobotomy, topectomy and advanced shock-therapy, exercised with sufficient skill to avoid permanent damage to the tissue. There will be papers published some day, when my findings are sufficiently comprehensive, and I assure you that your own case will be much more than a mere footnote. Meanwhile, the work goes on."

I remember my reaction to Wagram's words. "So that's it," I said. "You actually induce amnesia, deliberately and artificially erase all memory-patterns."

"Not in your case," he told me. "It wasn't necessary, any more than it was necessary during the war when I first began to study and specialize

in mnemonic disorders. But I *have* learned how to duplicate general as well as retrograde amnesia without risk of amentia or physical lesion. And that's what I've done for my screaming people.

"In effect, I reduce them to the prenatal stage, and put them back in the womb. Then, very slowly, with the help of the staff working under my direction and with my prescribed techniques—I allow them to be born again. To become infants, little children; to learn once more how to walk, and feed themselves, and control bodily functions. I teach them to talk, to think, guide them through childhood and adolescence to full maturity. All this, of course, with a careful avoidance of traumatic incident; and naturally, in a comparatively short time. The autonomous nervous system responds quickly, relearning and re-adapting previous patterns of behavior. In some cases a year or two is necessary for complete reeducation; in others, I've seen miracles accomplished in eight or ten months."

"But don't you get zombies, robots?"

"Not when the process is accompanied by selective memory-restoration. When these people are ready for it,

I begin the process of re-orientation; that is to say, I feed them data based on their actual past life. With the help of family and friends I can quickly and effectively recreate the sense of continuity based on a factual awareness of previous existence. But without the stress and tensions dramatized by Freud in his concept of Id and Ego and Super-Ego. I give them back their past without fear and guilt, without the screams."

"You couldn't give me back mine."

"No, for I didn't induce the condition, merely corrected the concussion. But it doesn't matter, really, does it? Not as long as you're satisfied with the present."

I agreed with him then, and let the matter drop. And whenever I had problems—daily tension, nightly dreams—I went back to Wagram and talked it out. When Roxie started taking lessons and private coaching, when she began getting a few-walk-on or one-line bits in TV shows, when I started branching out at the transcription agency, I kept Wagram informed. Somehow our relationship was never on a social plane, but Wagram remained an important part of my existence. He was, in a way, my only

link with the mysterious past; and I suppose I kept going there, from time to time, with the hope that sooner or later he could guide me back and help me to fully establish my identity. Always, of course, when I brought the matter up directly, he repeated his dictum. "The past doesn't matter as long as you're satisfied with the present."

And always I'd been able to reconcile myself to this statement. Always, until now.

Until now, when I was writhing and screaming in the womb, remembering last night. After a time I was able to talk rationally about it and he made me go over it again and again and asked many pertinent questions.

"It's beginning to sound a bit like last week's episode," he told me, when at last I emerged from the red chamber and donned my clothes once again. "Remember, you came to me with the story of your dream? Something about firing a rifle on a target-range covered with snow? I told you then what must be happening. Your buried memories, the suppressed content, attempt to break through to the conscious level in symbolic form. All that is necessary is to realize this. Of course, if one

likes, one can examine these symbols and arrive at an interpretation. For example, in this dream of yours last night, there's the skeleton, the smothering attempt, the—"

"But last night was different!" I exclaimed. "It *wasn't* a dream! Look, here's the black velvet case, it was in my jacket-pocket this morning."

"Couldn't it have been there last night as well?" Dr. Wagram leaned back in his chair and stared at me across the desk. "Are you sure it isn't your wife's property?"

"I don't recall seeing her with such a case," I told him. "Besides, you're forgetting the most important thing. That Voice."

"I haven't forgotten, but at the moment this doesn't concern me. What concerns me is what *you* have forgotten. Frankly, Steve, there must be another explanation as to how you came into possession of this object. There's something you don't want to remember. A limited retrograde amnesic condition has been established; a purposeful occlusion that—"

"Please, don't throw me off with labels. I've got to find out what this is all about. Can't you see it's driving me crazy?"

"I don't like that word, Steve."

"I don't like it, either. I don't like to go to bed and hear strange commands, and have nightmares that seem real. A little more of this and I'll end up like your screaming people."

Wagram leaned forward, pursing his lips. "Steve, I'll be frank. You may not be too far wrong. I still feel I did an efficient job on you, surgically, but now I'm not so sure I did what was necessary psychically. Perhaps that's the next step. Maybe I ought to erase the past entirely—erase the dreams, erase the tension, give you a whole fresh start."

"You mean, to operate again? The way you do on these rich psychos of yours?"

"An operation, as you call it, would be unnecessary. I have certain shock-therapy techniques that would work quickly and easily."

"To make me forget all this?" I stood up. "But then I'd forget Roxie—"

"You could learn again. The others do."

"No."

"I'm not asking for a decision now. Don't try to make one. Think about it. Discuss it with your wife. Come to think of it, there's no reason

why she should be excluded; this is as much her problem now as it is yours. Perhaps you ought to have confided in her fully before—I might have been mistaken in urging you to keep the whole truth from her. Why don't we arrange to get together, the three of us, some day next week, and go over the entire matter? I won't try to deceive you, Steve; this dream of yours disturbs me because of its latent symbolic content."

"It disturbs me because I still don't think it was a dream."

I stood up, brushing past his desk. My arm swung out, dislodging the folded copy of the afternoon newspaper. I stooped, picked it up. My eyes scanned the headlines, halted at a routine little paragraph at the bottom of the front page.

"What are you reading?" Wagram asked.

"Here," I said, extending the paper and moving towards the door. "You read it. Maybe you'll find it interesting."

He took the paper from my hand, but I didn't wait. I walked out of there, then started to run. Somehow I couldn't face what would happen when he read what I had just read—the little para-

graph about the death, last night, of James P. Hexler, retired industrialist and art-collector, who had been robbed of a fortune in uncut emeralds and smothered with a pillow in his own bed at 100 Azure Drive . . .

Police. I had to go to the police.

I knew that, but this isn't what made me run all the way down to Sunset Strip.

Sooner or later I'd go to them or they'd come to me. Right now, I must see Roxie first. I must see her and tell her what had happened. Roxie would know how to help.

Suddenly I realized the truth. Roxie was more important to me than Dr. Wagram. He had failed me, just now; he hadn't been able to comprehend the facts and so he hadn't been able to help. Roxie had never been given a chance to help. I owed her that. And I owed myself that, too.

Because I couldn't conceive of how or why I'd kill a perfect stranger. And I had to know, before the police stepped in.

So I hailed a cab in front of the Bank of America and gave him the apartment address. And I sat forward on

the edge of the seat as we hit the Freeway, hit the afternoon tangle of traffic, veered off to the south, skidded down into the smog once more. That damned black velvet box was still in my jacket—the empty box. Where were the emeralds? Yes, and where was the Voice? For that matter, where was 100 Azure Drive? Surely nowhere near my apartment; but I had *walked* there last night. Walked there and stolen and killed.

I had no answers. Wagram had no answers. Maybe Roxie had some answers. Roxie could save me—

We pulled up before the apartment and I was out of the cab before it ground to a stop, pushing a bill into the driver's hand and brushing aside the change. Then I was running up the stairs, fumbling in my pocket for the key.

The key—where was it? I searched in my trousers, my jacket. Had I forgotten to take my key this morning? Well, no matter now. If Roxie was home, she'd let me in.

Roxie was home. The door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open, then halted, just in time to avoid stumbling over her overnight bag. It rested right

in the doorway. And next to it, on the floor, was her purse.

"Roxie!" I murmured.

There was a faint sound from the bedroom beyond. I crossed the room in three strides.

She was on the bed and he was bending over her, his hands coiled in her long red hair. He had wound her hair about her throat and now he was pulling the ends tight, strangling her in a scarlet noose. Her face was mottled and purple.

His face I couldn't see, didn't wait to see. I jumped him from behind, and pulled him off. And then I tore the heavy bed-lamp from its socket and I smashed his skull, smashed and battered at the top of his head until he slumped to the floor and I could stare down into his unconscious face.

At first I didn't recognize it—hadn't expected to recognize it, of course. And then, beneath the pallor of that contorted countenance a familiar expression emerged. The man had aged, his hair was graying, there was no pan-make-up on the face. But I could still identify it.

"Bucky Dugan," I murmured.

Bucky Dugan. Yes, I remembered him now. He used

to be on the network, M.C. of one of those quiz shows, until the scandals broke last year. Then he'd disappeared.

Things began to click into place now. Click-click-click, a tinkling sound, like the rattle of little silver bones jangling in the night-wind.

I stooped and searched his pockets, knowing what I'd find. My key, of course. And the rough objects the size of robins' eggs. They were grimy and encrusted, but as I turned them the light caught a hint of green flame.

Roxie lay back on the bed, breathing stertorously. But she still breathed and that was all I needed to know. I could call the police, now. They'd send an ambulance over, take care of her.

I made the call hastily, and hung up when they asked my name.

It would have been fine if I could have stayed with her until they arrived, but there wasn't time. And it wasn't safe; not with the unconscious man on the floor and that other man—the dead man—discovered out there in the big house on Azure Drive.

So I left, hastily, running down the street until I found another cab. Then I made the driver wait while I located my

address-book and found the name I sought.

I gave him a number out on the Strip. Funny that I should be retracing my route again. But then it was all very funny, all very coincidental—until one stopped to think, stopped to realize that there was no coincidence involved at all.

This time we drove back through dusk, and the lights began to blaze up—the enchanted lights of an enchanted city. The wonderful lights of a world of magic, blazing forth from all of those wonderful, magic clip-joints and gay bars and mortuaries which make up the romantic spectacle of Hollywood by night. The vampires would be abroad, now. The bloodsuckers. And there was one blood-sucker in particular whom I was seeking.

We came to the building; one of those two-story layouts divided up into small cubicles where little men spend their days barking into their telephones, where the air is filled with stale cigar-smoke and the endless babble of *darling, sweetheart, lover-boy, let's get together for lunch, let's make a deal, let's sign quick before they change their minds.*

I didn't know if I'd find

him there this late, or if I'd have to seek him out at the Vince Street Derby, or Barney's Beanery, or even Tail o' The Cock. But I was past caring. If I had to track him all over town I'd catch up with him eventually. And when I did, I knew what I was going to do.

As it turned out, he *was* in his office, and alone. So I merely had to walk in, close the door behind me, march over to the desk, reach down, and grab him by the throat. I squeezed hard, but not too hard. That was the only difficult part, really—remembering that I mustn't kill him. Not yet, anyway. And then I stared down into his crumpled face and said, "All right, Clermer, let's have the straight story. Who paid you to bring Roxie to me in the first place? Who paid you, and how much?"

He talked, then.

It was all bluff and bluster at first, and I had to slap him around a bit before he realized that I meant business. Once he made a break for his desk-drawer, but he never got his hand on the gun. In a way that was all to the good, because I took the gun myself. And after that, everything was much easier.

Only it wasn't easy to hear

what he had to tell me. It wasn't easy to hear the truth, even though I expected and anticipated most of what he had to say.

Nothing was easy until I came to leave. Until I marched out of there and started walking north, into the canyon, with the gun cocked and ready in my pocket.

Nothing was easy until I came to Wagram's place.

The night was deeper here in the canyon. The private driveway held a private darkness, and there were no lights in the big house beyond.

The screaming people were asleep, and I had no desire to wake them. Let them slumber in their wombs, their tombs, their dooms. Let them rot in the lair of the womb-faker, the tomb-breaker, the doom-maker. *Dr. Carl Wagram*. I read his name etched in bronze. I saw his name, etched in blood, emblazoned on a bleeding brain.

The door was locked. I didn't care. I knew other ways of entry. Case-entry. Window-entry. Breaking and entering.

There was no Voice to guide me here, but I didn't need one now. I knew how to walk in the dark, how to stalk in the dark, how to simulate

the silence of a shadow flitting down the long hall on the soundproofed side of the building.

The soundproofed side—that's where the screaming people were. I could detect the dim light issuing from beneath the door on my left.

I wasn't afraid. I had Clermer's gun. I edged up to the door, turned the knob slowly. The door opened.

The wide room was bathed in twilight from recessed, indirect fixtures set in the walls. And it was lined with low cribs that looked like beds, yet bore a mocking resemblance to still another place of slumber. *Eternal slumber*. As I gazed down into the cold countenances of the occupants, the resemblance heightened.

These were not beds. They were coffins. And they contained corpses.

There were no screaming people here; the mouths were closed in thin-lipped lines, the faces were slack, the eyes glazed. I saw a dozen coffin-like cubicles; ten were occupied. I glanced at the faces through a tangle of apparatus overhead; then recognized the mundane instruments and installations used in ordinary intravenous feeding.

They weren't really dead,

but merely sleeping. Or in a coma, rather—for my presence did not awaken them. I gazed into their frozen features, then froze myself. Two faces I recognized, two I knew. "Bittner!" I murmured. "Corelli!"

Yes, Dr. Bittner. And Dr. Corelli. Wagram's own assistants. He'd said they helped him with the screaming people, and yet they were lying here with the others. And the others did not scream.

I was the one who wanted to scream, but I held the gun and I held my purpose and I held my course. I moved towards the door at the far side of the room. Wagram's private quarters must be beyond.

Yes, there was light flooding forth from under this door, too. I approached the panel slowly, cautiously. Gently, I eased the door ajar.

Now I could see into the room ahead. Wagram's private study, as I'd suspected. And I could see the back of his head over the top of the big armchair, see the front of his head as he swivelled and turned, see the look in his eyes as he recognized me, see the slackness of his mouth as he goggled at the gun in my hand.

"That's right," I said, soft-

ly. "Don't try to get up. In fact, I wouldn't advise you to attempt to move at all."

"Steve—"

"I know it's a surprise. You were expecting Bucky Dugan, weren't you?"

"I—"

"Let me do the talking. There are a few things I'd like to get straight before I call the police." He started to say something, but I waved him into silence. The gun was much better than a magic wand; I could perform some really amazing transformations with that gun. And he knew it, because he slumped back in his chair and listened.

"I've never cared for the usual denouement," I said, softly. "You know the bit—where the murderer holds a gun on the detective and blurts out a complete explanation of his crimes, just before the cops break in and rescue his intended victims. Fortunately, the situation is reversed now. So let me tell it my way. All I want from you is confirmation or correction."

"Steve, you're not well, you need help—"

"I've *had* your kind of help," I told him. "All I ever want of it. And at the time, I was grateful. Grateful that you came along, opportunely,

to rescue me and save my life. Now I wonder if I wouldn't have been better off if I'd died out there on the desert. At least I wouldn't have served as your guinea-pig.

"Because that's what I was, wasn't I? You experimented on me, using my genuine amnesia as a base on which to superimpose an artificial personality-pattern. I was the first, wasn't I?"

I waited, waving the gun, until he nodded reluctantly.

"That's what I thought. Once you saw how easily it was possible to control an amnesic, you applied similar techniques with your so-called screaming people. The hopeless cases, whom only wealth saved from permanent public institutionalization; people whose families wanted to avoid publicity and who were willing to consent to anything which might seemingly restore the sanity of their loved ones.

"You had sent me back into the world, and you were able to send them back, when and if you so desired. My memory was lost in the accident; their memories you erased with shock-treatments. Is that the story?"

"Yes." Wagram sighed the word.

I raised the gun. "That's the story," I said, "but not the truth. I'm no neurologist, but I do know that the actual source of memory-patterns has never been definitely located in the human brain. You can't deliberately 'erase' memory, as you claim, without irreparable damage to actual cellular tissue and structure. Many external physical agents can bring about temporary amnesia, partial or complete—but unless there's widespread permanent deterioration, memory returns. You can't do what you claim to have done, physiologically. So your erasure must have been accomplished *psychologically*, instead. In my case, and in the case of all the poor victims of your 'advanced' therapy, you seized upon a temporary lapse in orientation and recall and made it permanent. And there's just one way in which you or anyone else could do this—through suggestion, through hypnosis. And you installed those permanent memory-blocs yourself; did so deliberately."

"All right," Wagram said. "I'll admit that. But there was a reason, I've already explained it to you. By suppressing the memories, I could suppress the sources of psychosis

and prevent any recurrence of aberration. That was the theory, the basis of my techniques—"

"Perhaps it was, originally. But then you found that your hypnotherapy, administered to stunned and literally infantile personalities, gave you complete and utter control over your patients. You could actually order their present and future existences as you willed. And the temptation was too great, wasn't it? You began to think about ways of using that power. Of what it would be like to send supposedly cured patients back into the world who were actually under your eternal command. You could install a series of hypnotic controls, insure just the reactions you desired. Oh, it wasn't quite that simple, I realize that; it wasn't just a matter of sitting at some sort of psychic switchboard and pressing buttons at will, or being able to hold all the tangled strings and making the puppets dance. You needed other help, and you got it."

"Clermer told you this?" Wagram murmured.

"He told me enough so that I can guess the rest. I know about last night, for example. You were planning to take a

big step forward, weren't you? If I'd succeeded as you intended, then you'd set up other similar tasks for the rest of your screaming people. You thought you'd found a way of committing the so-called perfect crime.

"Somehow you learned of Hexler's emeralds. Perhaps through some relative who might have been a patient of yours. You made it your business to gain access to his home, to 'case the joint' and familiarize yourself with the physical layout and with his personal habits. Then you sent me there, to kill him and to steal the stones. But something went wrong.

"It took you a while to figure out what had happened. Today, when I showed up here at noon, you realized what must have occurred. So while you kept me occupied and we talked, you got the key to my apartment. While I was in that womb of yours, you gave the key to Bucky Dugan. He was one of your patients, one of your screaming people—had been, ever since he cracked up after the quiz-show mess. You went into that charming little morgue of yours, where you keep your wonderful cures in hypnotic trance, and you fed Bucky Dugan full of subliminal sug-

gestion, then sent him out to kill. And again, something went wrong, because I showed up in time to forestall him. She isn't dead, Wagram."

He stood up then. His eyes never left the muzzle of the gun, but he stood up anyway. "The police—she'll talk—"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to talk, too."

Wagram shook his head.

"No. You're wrong. You won't talk." He took a step forward. "You won't talk, and you won't shoot me, either. Because you can't, you know."

My finger tightened on the trigger. "I wouldn't risk it if I were you," I muttered.

"There's no risk involved."

He was just a grotesque, bald-headed little fat man and there was nothing imposing, nothing menacing, about his appearance.

But all at once I wasn't *seeing* him any more. I was *hearing* him. I was listening to his voice, as it changed—as it became *the Voice*.

"Yes. You were right, Steve. I do use hypnotic controls. I have used them to suppress your latent memories. I have used them to install commands. And you obeyed. Remember last night, Steve? You obeyed me then. Just as you obey me now. Because you

must obey. You know that, don't you? You must always obey. Unless you listen to me, you'll go back. Back to the pain, forever. Do you understand? Back to the pain, *forever*. I can do that, you know. I can send you there forever—send you to the time when you were crushed under the car, screaming your life away. You don't want to scream again, do you, Steve? You don't want to scream always and always, the way you feel like screaming now . . . it's more than anyone can bear, isn't it, the agony inside your skull . . . you're lying under the car, you can't move, you can't possibly move or get away from the pain . . . it's crushing you, Steve, you've got to make it stop . . .”

And it *was* crushing me, and I couldn't see Wagram any more. I couldn't see the room, because it was dark here on the desert and I was trapped, trapped under two tons of steel, and the pain was all around me and I wanted to scream, had to scream.

“Don't,” said the Voice. “There's another way. The only way. Just hold out your hand. There, hold it out. Give me the gun, Steve. You don't need the gun, do you? That's right . . . just give me the gun. It's the gun that is hurt-

ing you. Once you get rid of it you won't feel the pain. There will be no more pain. Just darkness . . . darkness and peace. You will rest then. Rest and forget. Forget that any of this ever happened. It was just a bad dream. A bad dream. Give me the gun—”

And I was out there in the darkness on the desert, but a million miles away was the end of my hand, and I was holding it out to him and he was taking the gun and I could feel the pain flowing down my arm (how slowly the pain flows when it has a million miles to go) and into the gun that he was taking and in a moment I would be free and the pain would be gone and the Voice would be gone and there would be nothing but the rapture of release.

The Voice told me that, I believed the Voice, I obeyed the Voice, and then—the Voice stopped.

The Voice stopped, and I opened my eyes.

I was back in Wagram's study and I was staring at him wondering what had happened to the Voice.

Wagram stood there, the gun dangling between his fingers. He let it fall and raised his hand to his throat, fumbling at the shiny object

which quivered there in the space between his wide collar and his pudgy chin.

The light glittered on the length of the vibrating knife-blade. It glittered on the redness which gathered and gushed forth from the spot where the tip had penetrated his veined neck.

He took a half-step forward and opened his mouth, but no Voice came forth—only a thin trickle of pinkish foam. He stared at the blade of the scalpel lodged in his throat, then fell and lay silent. Silent and forever still.

I turned. Roxie stood in the doorway.

"Just in time," she whispered. "I must have come to right after you left. I knew you'd head straight for here, so I followed, before the police arrived. I found the scalpel out there, in the other room, where those creatures are sleeping. And I heard you and Wagram talking, heard what he told you there at the last. Oh, Steve, I'm so glad I got here before he—"

She started forward but I ignored her. I stooped and picked up the gun. "I'm not glad," I said, softly. "I'm sorry. Very sorry. You should have kept running, Roxie. Even without the emeralds,

you should have kept running while you had the chance."

"Steve—"

"No, don't come any closer." I had the gun now, held it steadily. "You see, there's just one thing wrong with your reasoning. I didn't head straight for here after I left the apartment. I made a stop first, out on the Strip. I saw your friend Clermer."

Drained white, the pallor of her face was indescribably lovely when framed by that long red hair.

"Or should I say Wagram's friend Clermer?" I continued. "He must have been Wagram's friend, first. Because it was Wagram who came to him, originally, and asked him to introduce you to me."

"No, that's not true! I don't know what Clermer told you, but he lied!"

I shook my head. "I'm willing to believe him," I answered. "Because it all fits."

My voice softened. "I think I understand, Roxie. I can see how it was. You were just one of those good-looking women who never quite managed to make the grade. The breaks hadn't come your way, and you were getting just a little panicky about the future. Maybe you'd have to choose between marrying some bartender or taking the B-girl

route. Then Wagram came along with his proposition. Clermer was to introduce you to me, you'd make your play, we'd get married. That would give Wagram what he needed to continue his experiments—a go-between, a liaison agent, someone who could help him to keep control. In return, he'd cut you in on his future profits. Because he told you his plans, didn't he, Roxie? He told you that he intended to use me as a sort of zombie, in robbery and murder. And you agreed."

"But it didn't work out that way," Roxie murmured. "I loved you, Steve."

"Yes. You loved me, and you loved living in a crummy little apartment and taking cheap bit parts when you could get them. But all the while you loved money more. And Wagram kept building me up, waiting for the right proposition to come along. When he planned this Hexler affair he thought he had it in the bag. Only that's when you got smart."

Roxie closed her eyes. "No, Steve, no. Clermer didn't tell you this."

"Of course, he didn't, not this part. I had to figure it out for myself. But it's perfectly obvious, isn't it? There were

a couple of things even Wagram didn't know about your past. That you worked a season or two with a carney, for example. Long enough to learn how to throw knives—as Wagram found out, just now. More important, my guess is that you probably got acquainted with some mentalist; well enough acquainted so that you understood the scope of Wagram's plans for me and realized they might work.

"It was a simple enough idea. Wagram planted the entire pattern of post-hypnotic suggestion with me when I visited him last week and arranged for you to give me a prearranged signal while I slept which would set the whole series of commands in motion as a sort of dream in which a Voice directed me.

"But even Wagram wasn't fool enough to believe that a dazed somnambulist could get away with a detailed crime. *You* had to get there first, didn't you? Last night, when you were sure I was asleep, *you* went to Hexler's. That's why the window was already open, that's why the lock on the window-seat had already been forced, that's why the emeralds were already stolen. And that's why Hexler was already dead when I arrived. *You* strangled him with his

pillow. I merely repeated the gesture with a corpse."

"That's insane—"

"But it just might have worked, mightn't it? You came back, then gave the pre-arranged signal which activated Wagram's pattern of suggestion over me. So that I'd retrace your footsteps, leave telltale fingerprints, retain a memory which would later convince me that I'd been guilty of the crime. The rest of it I can figure out, too. Wagram expected me to come running to him today, with the story. And he'd be very sympathetic, but finally he'd agree to let me go to the police. That's when you'd step in to testify about my inexplicable absence. Everything would come out then; everything except the present whereabouts of the emeralds—which you were already to have concealed, and turn over to Wagram once I was safely incarcerated and the heat was off. It was a doubly-perfect crime, wasn't it, Roxie?

"Only you wanted to make it triply-perfect. By crossing up Wagram, taking the emeralds yourself, and making a run for it. Mexico, I suppose.

"But when I came to Wagram, something I said or did seemed to have aroused his

suspicious. Maybe you were supposed to have phoned him, and didn't. Anyway, he figured things out. And he stole my key, gave it to Dugan, sent Dugan to kill you. It was all right if I discovered your body—that would merely implicate me further, when Wagram informed the police he had Hexler's killer. Maybe I was to be accused of your death, too. In any event, Wagram would get rid of me, of you, and of any suspicion of complicity.

"Except, of course, that I arrived before Dugan finished the job. And went to Clermer. And came here." I shook my head. "Why didn't you keep on running, Roxie? Why did you come back?"

She stared into my eyes. "To save your life, Steve. Wagram had the gun. In another minute he'd have killed you."

"I know."

"Maybe it's true, Steve, maybe everything you said is true. And maybe there were other things to come. What would you say if I told you that Carl Wagram confided in me? What if I told you that he was in love with me himself, that he offered me a full share in his future? If this experimental venture succeeded, he wasn't going to stop there. He

had plans for his patients, Steve, big plans. Don't forget, some of them were wealthy and important, and all of them had influential connections. He could send them back to their homes, control them through his post-hypnotic suggestions and pseudomemories and plant observers at their sides, too. He'd recruit his own staff of nurses and attendants for the job.

"And it wasn't murder and robbery he had in mind—there were bigger things. Some of these people of his had access to estates, trust-funds, controlling interests in banks, insurance companies. There'd be ways of making millions, in the end, without risk or bloodshed involved.

"I could have shared that, Steve. But instead, when I came here tonight and picked up that scalpel, I killed him. And saved you."

"Because you knew it was too late, then. If he killed me there'd be an investigation and both he and you would eventually be implicated. So you got rid of him instead, hoping that I'd take pity on you and let you save your own neck."

"I—"

"Don't lie to me, Roxie. Not now."

She couldn't meet my gaze

any more. And the flush rose to cover the pallor.

"All right, Steve. It's true. I thought maybe you'd let me go."

I sighed and put the gun in my pocket.

"You're a smart girl, Roxie."

"Ohh—then you mean—?"

I turned away and faced the desk, staring down at the phone. "I'll give you ten minutes. Just ten minutes. Then I'll have to make the call."

She didn't say anything and I didn't look at her, but I knew that she'd opened the door and backed out of the room, retracing her steps, running down between the coffin-like rows where the screaming people slept like vampires in their native earth.

And I stood there in the soundproofed silence of the room and my heart beat a requiem and the watch on my wrist brought me ten minutes closer to my own death.

Then I called the police.

It didn't take them long to come—perhaps five minutes more, so that it was just fifteen minutes in all since Roxie had departed.

Only she hadn't departed, and fifteen minutes was quite long enough.

I should have thought about that a little more.

I should have thought about what might have happened when Dr. Carl Wagram died; Dr. Carl Wagram, whose personal control over the psychotic psyches of his patients plunged them into trance, so that they slept in the room beyond. I should have wondered if, perhaps, that control might end when Wagram's own life ended.

And I should have remembered that the rooms were completely and utterly sound-proof . . .

But the police came, and they chose to arrive by the entrance on this side of the house, and by the time I told a portion of my story and opened the door through which Roxie had made her escape, it was too late.

I could only stare into the room beyond and listen to the screaming people—the

screaming people who had awakened when Wagram died, awakened in all their ravening madness, and waited there when Roxie had retreated into their midst.

I could only stare at what was still in their midst, there on the floor—what had once been Roxie and was now only a torn and tattered mass over which the screaming people fought and clawed and bit and tore.

And the sound was deafening, so that the captain of detectives had to shout at me as I pushed him away and entered the room.

"Don't, man!" he cried. "Where do you think you're going? What's the matter with you?"

There was only one answer left to me now, of course, and I gave it to him.

I opened my mouth.

And began to scream—

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THE calendar-clock tells me that, at home, it is break-fast-time on the 24th of June. There's no reason, as far as I can see, why that should not be so; if it is, I must have been on Mars for exactly ten weeks. Quite a time; and I wonder how many more weeks to follow . . . ?

One day, other people will come here and find, at least, the ship. I ought to have tried to keep a regular log, but it did not seem worth while—and, anyway, it wouldn't have been regular for long. I have been—well, I had not been quite myself . . . but now that I have faced facts I am calmer, almost resigned; and I find myself feeling that it would be more creditable not to leave simply a mystery. Someone is sure to come one

day; better not to leave him to unravel it by inference alone, and perhaps wrongly. There are some things I want to say, and some I ought to say—besides, it will give me something to occupy my mind. That is rather important to me; I don't want to lose my hold on my mind again if I can help it. Funny, it is the early things that stick: there used, I remember, to be an old drawing-room song to impress the ladies: "Let me like a soldier fall!" . . . Hammy, of course, and yet . . .

But no need to hurry. There is, I think, still some time to go . . . I have come out on the other side of something, and now I find in the thought of death a calmness; it is so much less frightening than the thought of life in this

place . . . My regrets have turned outwards—the chief of them is for the distress my Isabella must now be feeling, and for the anxieties I must leave her to face alone as George and Ana grow up not knowing their father.

I do not know who is going to read what I am writing. One supposes that it will be some member of an expedition that knows all about us, up to the time of our landing. We gave the bearings of our landing place on the radio, so there should be no great difficulty in finding the ship where she now lies. But one cannot be sure. Possibly the message was not received: there may be reasons why a long time will pass before she is found. It could even be that she will be discovered accidentally by someone who never heard of us . . . So, after all, an account may serve better than a log . . .

I introduce myself: Trunho. Capitao Geoffrey Montgomery Trunho, of the Space Division of the Skyforce of Brazil, lately of Avenida Oito de Maio 138, Pretario, Minas Gerais, Brazil, America do Sul. Citizen of the Estados Unidos do Brasil, aged twenty-eight years. Navigator, and sole-surviving crew-

member, of the E. U. B. Spacevessel, *Figurao*.

I am Brasileiro by birth. My grandfather, and my father, were formerly British subjects, and became Brazilian by naturalization in the year 2056, at which time they changed the name from Troon to Trunho, for phonetic convenience.

Our family has a space tradition. My great-great-grandfather was the famous Ticker Troon—the one who rode the rocket, at the building of the first Space-Station. My great-grandfather was Commander of the British Moon Station at the time of the Great Northern War, and it is likely that my grandfather would have followed him there later, but for the war. It so happened, however, that the war broke out during my grandfather's term of groundwork at the British Space-House—or, to be more accurate, at one of the Space-House's secret and deep-dug operational centers; and it happened, further, that the actual outbreak of hostilities occurred when he was off-base. He was, in fact, on leave in Jamaica, where he had taken his wife (my grandmother) and my father, then aged six, on a visit to his mother's recently bought house.



The control room canted over, sending the men
reeling in all directions.

Many books have been written since the event, showing that that war was inevitable, and that the high councils knew it to be inevitable; but my grandfather always denied that. He maintained that on the highest levels, no less than in the public mind, it had come to be thought of as the-war-that-would-never-happen.

Our leaders may have been foolish; they may, in a long state of deadlock, have been too easily lulled: but they were not criminal lunatics, and they knew what a war must mean. There were, of course, incidents that caused periodical waves of panic, but however troublesome they may have been to trade and to the stock-markets, they were not taken very seriously on the higher political levels, and from a service point of view were even felt not to be a bad thing. Had the never-happen attitude been quite unperturbed there would, without doubt, have been cuts in service allocations, technical progress would have suffered in consequence, and too much of a falling-behind could conceivably mean that the Other Fellows would have gained enough ascendancy and superiority in armament to make

them think a quick war worth risking.

In the opinion of his own Department, my grandfather asserted, an actual outbreak seemed no more likely than it had seemed two years, or five years, or ten years before. Their work was going on as usual, organizing, re-organizing, and superseding in the light of new discoveries; playing a kind of chess in which one's pieces were lost, not to the opponent, but to obsolescence. There never had been, according to him, any conclusive proof that the war was not touched off by some megalomaniac, or even by accident. It had long been axiomatic on both sides that, should missiles arrive, the form was to get one's own missiles into the air as soon as possible, and hit the enemy's potential as fast and as hard as one could—and, in 2044, there was little that could not be considered a part of his potential, from his factories to the morale of his people, and the health of his crops.

So, one night, my grandfather went to sleep in a world where peace was no more restive than it had been for years; and in the morning he woke in one that had been at war for four hours, with

casualties already high in the millions.

All over North America, all over Europe, all over the Russian Empire there were flashes that paled the sun, heat-waves that seared, and set on fire, whole countryside. Monstrous plumes were writhing up into the sky, shedding ashes, dust, and death.

My grandfather was immediately obsessed by his duty—his obligation to get back somehow to his post, which was that section of the British Service located in northern Canada. For two days he spent nearly all his time in Kingston, badgering the authorities, and anyone else he could find.

There were plenty of aircraft there, plenty of all kinds, large airliners, crowded freighters, small, owner-flown machines, but they were all coming from the north; most of them pausing only to refuel, and then fleeing on, like migrating birds, to the south. Nothing took off for the north.

Communications were chaotic. No one could tell what fields were still available, still less how long they would remain so. Pilots resolutely refused to take the risk, even

for large sums, and the airport authorities backed them up by refusing to sanction any northward flights with an impregnability against which my grandfather, and numbers of anxious United States citizens battered in vain.

On the evening of the second day, however, he succeeded in buying someone out of a seat on a south-bound aircraft, and set off with the intention of making a circuit via Port Natal, in Brazil, Dakar, and Lisbon, and so to England where he hoped to be able to find a service machine to get him to Canada. In point of fact, he arrived at Freetown, Sierra Leone, about eight days later, and got no further. News there was still scarce and contradictory, but there was enough of it to convince not merely pilots, but everyone else, that even if an aircraft should safely get through, a landing almost anywhere in Europe would mean delayed, if not immediate, suicide.

It took him two months to get home again to Jamaica, by which time, of course, the Northern War was almost history.

It was, however, such recent history that the non-combatants were still numbed by the shock. The near-paralysis

of fright which had held everyone outside the war-zone for a month was relaxed, but people had still not fully got over their astonishment at finding themselves and their homes surviving undamaged. Still persisting, too, was that heightened awareness which made each new, untroubled day seem a gracious gift, rather than a right. There was a dazed pause, a sense of coming-to again before the worries of life swept back.

And all too soon the worries were plentiful—not only over radiation, active dusts, contaminated waters, diseases threatening both flora and fauna, and such immediate matters; but also over the whole problem of re-orientation in a world where most of a hemisphere had become a malignant, unapproachable desert. . . .

Jamaica, it was clear, was not going to have much to offer except exports for which there was virtually no market. It could sustain itself; one might be able to go on living there, with much diminished standards, but it was certainly no place to build a new life.

My grandmother was in favor of a move to South Africa where her father was

chairman of the board of a small aircraft company. She argued that my grandfather's knowledge and experience would make him a useful addition to the board, and that with most of the great aircraft factories of the world now destroyed, a tremendous growth of the company was inevitable.

My grandfather was unenthusiastic, but he did go as far as to pay a visit there to talk the matter over with his father-in-law. He returned unconverted, however. He was not, he said, at all taken with the place; there was something about it that made him uneasy. My grandmother, though disappointed, refrained from pressing the matter—which turned out to be fortunate, for a little over a year later her father, and all her relatives there, were among the millions who died in the great African Rising.

But before that took place my grandfather had made his own decision.

"China," he said, "is not out, but she has been very badly mauled and reduced—it will take her a long time to recover. Japan has suffered out of proportion to the material damage there because of the concentration of her population. India is weakened, as

usual, by her internal troubles. Africa has been kept backward. Australia is the center of the surviving British, and may one day become an important nation—but it will take time. South America, however, is intact, and looks to me to be the natural focus of world power in the immediate future; and that means either Brazil, or the Argentine. I should be very much surprised indeed if it were to turn out to be Argentina. So we shall go to Brazil."

To Brazil, then, he went, offering his technical knowledge. Almost immediately he was put in charge of the then rudimentary Space Division of the Brazilian Skyforce to organize the annexation of the battered Satellites, dispatch provision-missiles to the British Moon Station, and then to direct its relief, the rescue of its company—including his father—and its annexation, together with that of the entire Lunar Territory, to the Estados Unidos do Brasil.

The cost of this enterprise, particularly at such a time, was considerable, but it proved to be well justified. Prestige has varied sources. In spite of the fact that the Moon Stations and the Satellites had exerted an infinitesimal, and almost self-cancelling, effect

upon the Northern War, the knowledge that they were now entirely in Brazilian hands—and perhaps the thought that whenever the moon rose one was being overlooked from Brazilian territory—undoubtedly made a useful contribution to the ascendancy of the *Brasilieros* at a time when the disordered remnant of the world was searching for a new center of gravity.

Once he had the space project well in hand, my grandfather, though not yet a Brazilian citizen, was given the leadership of a mission to British Guiana, where he pointed out the advantages that an amputated colony would derive from integration, on terms of full equality of citizenship, with a powerful neighbor. The ex-colony, already uneasily conscious of pressure on its western border from Venezuela, accepted the offer. A few months later, Surinam and French Guiana followed its example; and the Caribbean Federation signed a treaty of friendship with Brazil. In Venezuela, the government, bereft of North American support and markets, fell to a short, sharp revolution whose leaders also elected for integration with Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, and Peru

hastened to sign treaties of support and friendship. Chile concluded a defensive alliance with Argentina. Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay were drawn together into nervous neutrality, and declarations of good will towards both their powerful neighbors.

My grandfather took out his naturalization papers, and became a loyal and valued citizen of the Republic.

My father graduated from the University of Sao Paulo in 2062 with a Master's degree in Extra-Terrestrial Engineering, and then spent several years at the government testing-station in the Rio Branco.

It had long been my grandfather's contention that the development of space craft was not simply a matter of prestige, as some thought, and certainly not the expensive frivolity that others proclaimed it, but a wise precaution that would some day prove its worth. For one thing, he argued, if Brazil were to neglect space, someone else would take it over. For another, there would arise, sooner or later, the need for an economic space-freighter. The whole foundation of modern technology rested upon metals; and with the rich metalliferous areas of Canada, Siberia, and

Alaska now unworkable; with Africa absorbing all she could mine; India in the market for all she could buy, and South America consuming at an increasing rate, the shortages already apparent in the rarer metals would become more extensive and more acute. The cost, when it should become necessary to seek them in sources outside the Earth, was bound to be great; at present it would be prohibitive, but he did not believe it would remain prohibitive. If practical freighters were developed it could mean that one day Brazil might have a monopoly of at least the rarer metals and metalliferous earths.

How much faith my father had in the argument behind the policy, I do not know. I think it possible that he did not know, either, but used it simply for the problems it raised; and out of all these his hardest and most favorite concerned what he called "the crate"—his name for an economical, unmanned freighter—and the space-assembled cruiser. Numbers of "crates" of various types exist on his drawing-boards, but the cruisers—craft radically different in conception from those that must resist the stresses of take-off against the pull of

gravity—still remain somewhat fluid in conception.

I myself, though I inherit my family's almost pathological interest in matters beyond the ionosphere, do not share my father's ability to sublimate it in theory and design, wherefore, after taking my degree at Sao Paulo, I attended the Skyforce Academy, and was duly commissioned in the Space Division.

A family connection has its uses. I should not, I am sure, have received preference over better qualified men, but when the original list of twenty volunteers for the appointment of navigator aboard the *Figurao* had been whittled down to four, all equally qualified, I suspect that the name Trunho—and Troon, before it—had some influence on the decision.

Raul Capaneiro, our Commander, very likely owed his selection to not unsimilar circumstances, for his father was a Marshal in the Skyforce. But it was not so with Camilo Botoes—he was with us simply because he was unique. His intention of visiting another planet seems to have been formed about the time he was in his cradle, and, not a great deal later it would appear, he had conceived the

idea that some unusual qualification would give him an advantage over the one-line man. He set out to acquire it, with the result that when the call for volunteers came, the Skyforce discovered with some surprise that it had among its personnel a capable electronics officer who was also a geologist, and not merely a dabbler, but one whose published papers made it impossible to ignore his competence to produce a preliminary study in areology.

My own appointment to the crew troubled my mother, and distressed my poor Isabella, but its effect on my father was dichotomous. The *Figurao*, the Big Shot, was the product of his department, and largely of his own ideas. Its success would give him a place in history as the designer of the first interplanetary link; if I were to go with it, his connection would be still more personal, making the venture something of a family affair. On the other hand, I am his only son; and he was sharply conscious that the very best of his skill, care, and knowledge must still leave the ship at the mercy of numerous unguessed hazards. The thought that he would be exposing me to risks he had been unable to foresee and could not guard against,

was in painful conflict with his awareness that any objections he might make to my going would be construed as lack of confidence in his own work. Thus, I put him in a rendingly difficult situation; and now I wish, almost more than anything else, that I had the means to tell him that it is not through any shortcoming of his that I shall not be going home to Earth. . . .

The launch took place on the 9th of December, a Wednesday. The preliminary jump was quite uneventful and we followed the usual supply-rocket practice in our intersection with the Satellite orbit, and in taking up station close to the Satellite itself.

I felt sentimentally glad the Station was Esatrellita Primeira; it made the expedition even more of a family affair, for it was the first space-station, the one that my great-great-grandfather had helped to build—though I suppose that most parts of it must have been replaced on account of war and other damage since those days.

We crossed over to Primeira, and put in more than a week of earth-days there while the *Figurao's* atmosphere-protection envelope was removed, and she was refuel-

ed, and fully provisioned. The three of us carried out tests in our various departments, and made a few necessary minor adjustments. Then we waited, almost wishing there had been more readjustments to keep us occupied, until Primeira, the moon, and Mars were in the relative positions calculated for our takeoff. At last, however, on Tuesday, the 22nd of December, at 0335 R.M.T., we made blast, and launched ourselves on the main journey.

I shall not deal here with the journey itself. All technical information concerning it has been entered by Raul in the official log, which I shall enclose, with this supplementary account, in a metal box for safe keeping.

What I have written so far has two purposes. One is, as I have said, to cover the possibility that it may not be found for a very long time; the other is to provide factual material by which any more imminent finder may check my mental condition. I have read carefully through it myself, and to me it appears to offer sufficient evidence that I am sane and coherent, and I trust that that will be the opinion of others who may read it, and that they may therefore con-

sider what follows to be equally valid.

The final entry in the log will be seen to record that we were approaching Mars on a spiral. The last message we sent before landing will be found on the file: "About to attempt landing area Isidis—Syrtris Major. Intended location: Long. 275: Lat. 48."

When Camilio had despatched that message, he swung the transmitter across on its bracket to lock it safely against the wall, and then lay back on his couch. Raul and I were already in position on ours. My work was finished, and I had nothing to do but wait. Raul had the extension control panel clamped across his couch in a position where he would still be able to operate it against a pressure of several gravities, if necessary. Everything had gone according to expectations except that our outer surface temperature was somewhat higher than had been calculated—suggesting that the atmosphere is a trifle denser than has been assumed—but the error was small, and of little practical significance.

Raul set about adjusting the angle of the ship, tilting her to preserve the inclination in relation to the braking thrust as we slowed. Our

couches turned on their gimbals as the speed decreased and the braking thrust of the main tubes gradually became our vertical support. Finally, when the speed was virtually zero, and we were standing balanced on our discharge, his job, too, was over. He switched-in the landing-control, and lay back, watching the progress of our descent, on the dials.

Beneath us, there now splayed downwards eight narrow radar beams matched for proximity, and each controlling a small lateral firing-tube. The least degree of tilt was registered by one or more of the beams, and corrected by a short blast which restored the ship to balance on the point of the main drive. Another beam directed vertically downwards controlled the force of the main drive itself, relating it to the distance of the surface below, and thus regulating the speed of the descent.

The arrangement lowered us, smoothly, and there was only the slightest of lurches as our supporting tripod set down. Then the drive cut out, vibration ceased, and an almost uncanny peace set in.

No one spoke. The completeness of the silence began to be broken by the ticking

and clicking of metal cooling off. Presently Raul sat up and loosed his safety straps.

"Well, we're there. Your old man did a good job," he said to me.

He got off his couch carefully, cautious of the unfamiliar feeling of gravity, and made for the nearest port. I did the same, and started to unscrew its cover. Camilo swung the radio over on its bracket, and transmitted: "*Figurao* landed safely Mars 0343 R.M.T. 18.4.94. Location believed as stated. Will observe and verify." Then he, too, reached for the nearest port-cover.

The view, when I had my port uncovered, was much what I had expected; an expanse of hummocky, rust-red desert sand reaching away to the horizon. Anywhere else, it would have been the least exciting of all possible views. But it was not anywhere else: it was Mars, seen as no one had ever seen it before . . . We did not cheer, we did not slap one another on the back . . . We just went on staring at it. . . .

At last Raul said, rather flatly:

"There it is, then. Miles and miles of nothing; and all of it ours."

He turned away, and went over to a row of dials.

"Atmosphere about fifteen per cent denser than predicted; that accounts for the overheating," he said. "We'll have to wait for the hull to cool down a bit before we can go out. Oxygen content very low indeed—by the look of things, most of it has been tied up in oxydyzing these deserts." He went over to a locker, and started pulling out spacesuits and gear. He did it clumsily; after weeks of weightlessness it is difficult to remember that things will drop if you let go of them.

"Funny that error about atmosphere density," said Camilo.

"Not so very," Raul replied. "Just that someone's crackpot theory about air leaking away into space got written into the assumptions, I reckon. Why the devil should it leak away unless there is a large body around to attract it? Might as well suggest that our own atmosphere is leaking to the moon, and then back again. Beats me how these looney propositions get a foot in, but I expect we'll find plenty more of them."

"Were they wrong about gravity, too?" I asked. "I seem to feel a lot heavier than I expected."

"No. That's as calculated. Just a matter of getting used to weight itself," he said.

I crossed the floor, and looked through the port that he had uncovered. The view was almost the same as through mine—though not quite, for in that direction the meeting of sand and sky was marked by a thin dark line. I wondered what it was. At that distance I could see no detail—nor, indeed, judge how far away the horizon was. I turned back, intending to find the eyepiece that would adapt the telescope, but at that moment the floor shifted under my feet. . . .

The whole room canted over suddenly, sliding me across the floor. The heavy port cover swung over. It just missed me, but it caught Raul, and sent him slamming against the main control-board. The room tilted more. I was flung back on the couch I had just left, and I clung to it. Camilo came sliding past, trying to grab at the couch supports to stop himself.

There were several thuds, a clatter, and finally a kind of crunching crash which set me bouncing on the couch springs.

When I looked round I found that what had, for the

brief period since our landing, been the floor, had become a vertical wall. Obviously the *Figurao* had toppled over, and now lay on its side. Camilo was huddled in the angle made by the erstwhile floor and the curved wall, all mixed up with the spacesuits and their accessories. Raul was spreadeagled over the control-board, and I could see blood trickling across it.

I dropped off the couch, and approached Raul. I started to lift his head, but it did not come easily. Then I found out why. It had crashed down on one of the control levers, and the handle had gone in at the temple. There was nothing to be done for him. I scrambled across, and looked at Camilo. He was unconscious, but there was no visible damage. His pulse was strong enough, and I set about trying to bring him round. Several minutes went by before his eyes opened, then they looked at me, screwed up, with lids fluttering, and closed again. I found some brandy. Presently he sighed, and his eyes opened again. They looked at me, wandered about the control room, and came back to me again.

"Mars?" he said. "Mars, the bloody planet. Is this Mars?"

There was a silly look about

him that made my spirits sink.

"Yes, this is Mars," I told him.

I lifted him on to one of the couches, and made him comfortable there. His eyes closed, and he went off again.

I looked round. The only part of the equipment, other than the spacesuits, that had been loose was the radio-transmitter. Camilo, after using it had pushed it aside, leaving it free to swing on its bracket; it had done just that, and been stove-in when it met one of the couches turning in its gimbals. It looked suitable for writing-off.

I couldn't just sit there, doing nothing but look at the other two, so I disentangled one suit, and coupled it up with its air-supply and batteries, and tested it. It worked perfectly. The thermometer giving the outside hull reading was down quite a bit from what it had been, and I decided to go outside to find the trouble.

Fortunately, as the ship lay, the airlock was at the side, the right side as one faced forward; had it been underneath, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have got out at all.

Even as we lay, it was awk-

ward enough, for the lock had been built to accommodate two men standing, and now one had to sit doubled up inside it. It worked, however—though when the outer door opened, the telescopic ladder could not be made to project at a suitable angle. I had to get out by jumping down six feet or so, and my first contact with the surface of Mars was undignified.

To stand there at last was, in the event, depressing. Not just because the only view was arid miles of red sand, but even more because I was alone.

It was the moment we had thought and talked of for so long, worked so hard for, risked so much for—and this was all. Anti-climax there would surely have been, but it would have been less dreary with someone to share it, with a little ceremony to mark the occasion. Instead, I just stood there, alone. Under the small, weak sun in the purplish sky I was dwindled to a tiny living mote with the barren wilderness pressing all about me . . .

Not that it was different from my expectations—in fact, it looked only too like them—and yet I knew now that in all my imaginings I had never remotely touched its real quality. I had thought

of it as empty and neutral; never suspected its implicit hostility . . .

Yet there was nothing there, nothing to be afraid of—except the worst thing of all: fear itself. The fear that has no cause, shape or center; that same amorphous fear that used to come creeping out of the dark, massing to invade the safety of one's childish bed . . .

I could feel the old panic, forgotten for so many years, rising up again. I was back in my infant self; all that I had learnt in the years between seemed to vanish; once more, I was the defenseless, beset by the incomprehensible. I wanted to run back to the ship, as to my mother, for safety. I all but did that . . .

Yet not quite . . . A vestige of my rational mind held me there. It kept on telling me that if I gave in to panic now, it would be far worse the next time, and the time after . . . And gradually, while I stood, the vestige gathered the strength to push the panic back. Soon I could feel it winning, like warm blood flowing in. Then I felt better. I was able to force some objectivity.

I looked carefully round. From this low viewpoint there was no trace anywhere of the

dark line that I had seen through the port when the *Figurao* was vertical. All the way round, red sand met purple sky in an endless, even line. There was nothing, nothing at all, on the face of the desert but the ship and myself under the center of a vast, upturned bowl.

Then I made myself pay attention to the ship. It was easy to see what had happened. Below the light dust of the surface, the sand had formed a crust. Our weight had caused the pediment plate on one of the tripod legs to break through the crust, and we had toppled over. I wondered for a moment if Raul would be able to contrive some way of getting us vertical again—and then suddenly recollected why he would not . . .

I went back into the ship, and looked for something to dig with. Camilo had not moved, and appeared to have fallen into a natural sleep. Luckily, someone had thought of equipping the ship with a sort of entrenching tool. It was small, but it would have to do. Getting Raul outside was unpleasant, and far from easy, but I managed it, and laid him on the sand while I dug. That was not easy work, either, in a spacesuit, and I thought it might take me sev-

eral shifts. But at about twelve inches down I suddenly broke through, and found myself looking into a black hole. Considering the misadventure to the ship, it seemed possible that the place was honeycombed with such cavities. I enlarged the hole until I was able to slide poor Raul into it. Then I blocked the opening with a slab of caked sand, covered it as best I could, and went back to the ship again.

I came out of the airlock to find that Camilo was now awake—not only awake, but sitting up on his couch, regarding me with nervous intensity.

"I don't like Martians," he said.

I looked at him more carefully. His expression was serious, and not at all friendly.

"I don't suppose I would, either," I admitted, keeping my tone matter-of-fact.

His expression became puzzled, then wary. He shook his head.

"Very cunning lot, you Martians," he remarked.

After we had had a meal he seemed a little better, though from time to time I caught him watching me carefully out of the corner of his eye. Indeed, he was paying so much attention to me that it

was some time before it occurred to him that there should be three of us.

"Where's Raul?" he asked.

I explained what had happened to Raul, showed him the switch lever that had done the fatal damage, and pointed out through the port the place where Raul now lay. He listened closely, and nodded several times, though not always where a nod seemed appropriate. It was difficult to know whether he was not quite grasping the situation, or whether he was making reservations of his own. He did not show distress about Raul, only a quiet thoughtfulness, and after he had sat in silent rumination on the matter for a quarter of an hour, it began to get on my nerves.

To break it up, I showed him the radio transmitter.

"It's taken a pretty nasty bash," I said, somewhat unnecessarily. "Do you think you can get it going again?"

Camilo looked it over for some minutes.

"It certainly has," he agreed.

"Yes," I said impatiently, "but the point is, can you fix it?"

He turned his head, and looked at me steadily.

"You want to get into touch with Earth," he announced.

"Of course, we do. They'll be expecting reports from us right now. They know our time of landing, but that's all, so far. We've got to put in an immediate report about Raul, and about the state of the ship. Tell them the mess we're in..."

He considered that in an unhurried way, and then shook his head, doubtfully.

"I don't know," he said. "You're so cunning, you Martians."

"Oh, for heaven's sake—!" I began, but then made a quick decision that it might be unwise to antagonize him. Rather than drive him into obstinacy, I tried to put across a calmly persuasive line.

He listened patiently, with a slight frown, as one taking into consideration every possible angle. At the end, still without committing himself on whether he thought he could make the radio work or not, he said that it was an important matter that required thinking over. I could only hold my temper for fear of setting up a worse conflict in his mind.

He retreated to his couch and lay on it, presumably to do his important thinking. I stood looking out of the port a while, and then, realizing that the day would soon be

coming to an end, got out the color camera, and busied myself with making the first records ever of the stages of a Martian sunset.

This was not a spectacular affair. The small sun grew somewhat redder as it dropped towards the horizon. As it disappeared from sight, the sky turned immediately from purple to black—all except a wispy stretch of cloud, quite surprising to me, which still caught the rays, glowing pinkly for a minute or two, and then vanished. Looking through another port I could see a small bright disc just above the rim, and climbing almost visibly up the spangled blackness. I took it to be Phobos, and turned the telescope on it. It does not appear to be of any great interest; not unlike our own moon, but less mountainous, and much less cratered.

All the time I was uneasily conscious of Camilo. Whenever I took a look in his direction I found his head turned my way, and his eyes watching me in a speculative fashion that was difficult to disregard. I did my best, however, and busied myself with fixing the camera to the telescope. The speed of the satellite rendered it none too easy

to keep it centered in the field of view, but I made a number of exposures. Camilo had fallen asleep again by the time I had finished, and I was tired enough to be glad to get on my own couch.

Once I had dropped off I slept heavily. When I woke, there was daylight outside the ports, and Camilo standing beside one of them looking out. He must have heard me move for he said, without turning:

"I don't like Mars."

"Nor do I," I agreed. "But then, I never expected to."

"Funny thing," he said. "I got it into my head last night that you were a Martian. Sorry."

"You had a nasty knock," I told him. "Must have shaken you up quite a bit. How are you feeling now?"

"Oh, all right—bit of a muzzy headache. It'll pass. Damn silly of me thinking you were a Martian. You're not a bit like one, really."

I was in the middle of a yawn, and failed to finish it properly.

"What," I inquired, with some caution, "what *are* Martians like?"

"That's the trouble," he said, still looking out of the port. "It's so hard to see them properly. They're so quick.

When you're looking at one place, you see a flicker of them moving in another, just out of the corner of your eye, and by the time you look there they are somewhere else."

"Oh," I said. "But, you know, I never noticed any when I was outside yesterday."

"But you weren't looking for them," Camilo pointed out, and truly.

I swung my feet off the couch.

"What about some breakfast," I suggested.

He agreed, but remained by the window while I set about getting things ready—an awkward job with a curved wall for a floor, and everything at right angles from its intended position. Now and then he would glance quickly from one side of the view to the other, often with a little sound of exasperation as though he had just missed something again. It was irritating, but on the whole a slight improvement on being taken for a Martian myself.

"Come and eat," I told him when I had the food ready. "They'll keep."

He left the port with some reluctance, but started in on the food with a good appetite.

"Do you think you'll be able

to fix the radio?" I inquired presently.

"Maybe," he said, "but is it wise?"

"Why the devil shouldn't it be?" I demanded, with some restraint.

"Well," he explained, "they might intercept our messages. And if they learn what a mess we're in it could very likely encourage them to attack."

"We'll have to take a chance on that. The important thing for us now is to get in touch with home, and see what they suggest. It seems to me possible, just possible, that we may be able to get the ship back to the vertical somehow—with the gravitation as low as it is. I can plot the course and time of takeoff, and look after that side, but can we manage her without Raul? He was the one with experience and special training. I have a *general* idea of the controls, and I suppose you have, but it is only general. This ship isn't built to stand up to the strains of ordinary takeoffs—that's why she had to have a special casing to get her from Earth to Primeira. She must have a specially calculated programme of safe velocities for takeoff from here—and that will have to be amended on account of the atmosphere being denser than was reckoned. We

don't want to burn her up, or melt her tubes. As things are, I don't begin to know about her acceleration schedule, her safety-factors. Damn it, I don't even know, off-hand, the escape velocity of Mars."

"It should take you all of two minutes to work that out," Camilo interrupted.

"I daresay, but there are a hell of a lot of things we can't work out without data. Some of it we'll be able to get from Raul's technical papers, no doubt, but there are bound to be all kinds of questions arising that we shall need advice about."

"M'm," said Camilo, doubtfully. His eyes strayed towards one of the ports for a moment, and then came back to me, looking suspicious again. "You didn't talk to them while you were out there?" he asked.

"Oh, hell," I said impatiently, and unwisely. "Look, there is nothing out there—nothing but sand. Come out with me, and see for yourself."

He shook his head slowly, and gave me the smile of a man who knows a trick worth two of that.

I was at a loss to know what line to take next. After I had thought about it a bit, it seemed to me that we were

not going to get far while he was worried by these Martian phantoms, and the sooner they could be erased, the better.

Perhaps I was wrong there. Perhaps I ought simply to have waited, hoping that the effect of the concussion would wear off. After all, except for the anxiety that must be going on at the other end of our radio link, there was no pressing hurry. The sun-charger would keep our batteries up, even at this distance from the sun; water is on an almost closed circuit, with very little loss, air-regeneration, too; there was victualing enough to last two of us for eighteen months. I could *have* waited. But it is one thing to consider a situation retrospectively, and quite another to be at close quarters with a single companion who is slightly off his head, and wondering whether time is likely to make him better or worse . . .

However, as the radio seemed to be in some way entangled in his mind with the intentions of his cunning Martians, I decided to lay aside that subject of the moment, and tried tackling him on his other specialty. I pulled out a lump of caked sand that I had brought inside, and handed it to him.

"What do you reckon that is?" I asked.

He gave it the briefest of glances.

"Haematite — Fe_2O_3 ," he said, looking at me as if I had asked a pretty stupid question. "Mars," he said, patiently, "is practically all oxides of one kind or another. This'll be the commonest."

"I've been thinking," I said. "One of our main objects, after getting here at all, is to bring in a preliminary report on the geology of Mars."

"Areology," he corrected me. "You can't possibly talk about the geology of Mars. Doesn't make sense."

"All right, areology," I agreed, finding his lucidity encouraging and irritating at the same time. "Well, we can at least make a start on that. There is a dark line on the horizon, over that way, that wants looking into—might be vegetation of some kind. If we get the platform out, we could have a look at it, and at the topography in general, too."

I made the suggestion with a casual air, and awaited his answer with some anxiety, for I felt that if I could use his geological — or areological — interests to lure him outside, even a brief expedition might serve to dispel this notion of

lurking Martians, and once that had been achieved, he would be willing to get on with the repair of the radio.

He did not reply immediately, and I restrained myself from looking up for fear of seeming anxious enough to rouse his suspicions. At last, when I had started to consider the next step, he said:

"They wouldn't be able to reach us once the platform lifted, would they?"

"Of course not—if they are there at all. I've not seen one yet," I said, trying not to give any encouraging support to his fancies.

"I *nearly* saw one half a minute ago. But they're always just too damned quick, blast them," he complained.

"There'd be no hiding from overhead observation in this desert," I pointed out. "If they are there, we'll be able to spot them easily from the platform."

"If—" he began indignantly, and then stopped, apparently struck by an idea. After a pause he went on in a quite different tone:

"All right. Yes, that's a good idea. Let's locate the platform, and start getting it out."

His change of front was sudden enough to make me look at him in astonishment.

His expression was enthusiastic, and he gave an encouraging nod. Apparently I had chosen the right line, though I hoped he would not back off the idea with the same unexpectedness that he had veered on to it. At the moment, however, he was certainly all for it, and pulled a file of papers out of a locker.

"The loading plan ought to be here," he said. "I'm pretty sure the platform was stowed in Number Two hold-section. . . ."

It was soon pretty clear that Camilo's "let's" was a manner of speaking. What he meant was that I should get the platform out. I made one attempt at persuading him to put on a spacesuit, and give me a hand, but he was so clearly averse to that that I gave up rather than risk having him turn against the whole idea. Once I had it assembled, and he could step straight on to it, I could lift it at once, and *show* him that nothing could be lurking in that desert. So presently I went out alone, and opened up Number Two hold-section to get the platform out.

There had been something of a tussle over the provision of a jet-platform for us. The type that had proved itself on

the moon over fifty years ago would not do: there, an object has only one-sixth of its Earth weight; on Mars, it weighs double its moon weight, and therefore any carrier must be heavier and more powerful. A wheeled vehicle would have been much lighter, but we were opposed to that for use on an unknown terrain. A platform could skim safely above any kind of surface, and my father had supported us. In the end, he had designed a suitable platform in three sections which were dispatched to Primeira to be stowed aboard the *Figurao* when she called there. Thus, for the main lift we had been spared the weight of the biggest single piece of equipment that we carried, and could simply jettison it on Mars when we took off for the return.

I found the three main sections, even at their Martian weight, quite as much as I wanted to handle, encumbered by my spacesuit. Once I had them laid out side by side on the sand, however, the bolting together was comparatively easy.

Camilo had switched on the helmet-radio belonging to one of the other spacesuits. From time to time he inquired:

"Have you seen any of them yet?"

Each time I assured him that I had not but, somehow, whether he answered, or remained silent, he managed to convey skepticism.

When the main floor was assembled, I went ahead with fixing the control-pillar. Thoroughly absorbed in the job, I lost all sense of my surroundings, remembering the empty stillness only when Camilo spoke. But when, after some two and a half hours, I had the assembly complete, and needing only a final check before the mounting of the fuel containers, my attention slackened and, with that, the bleakness and loneliness all about seemed to press closer and crowd me.

I decided I had put in a long enough spell outside for one day, and would be wiser to get back to the familiarity of the ship and the comfort of a meal before the willies could encroach enough to trouble me badly. As I came through the airlock I found Camilo seated on the pull-out stool in front of my charting-board. He turned round and watched me attentively; when I took off the helmet he seemed to relax, and looked somewhat relieved. I glanced at the radio transmitter, hoping that he might

have started to tackle that, but it was clear that it had not been touched.

He asked how things were going, and nodded when I told him.

"We'll need the two-man dome, and gear for it, and of course, the fuel containers—might as well unload the lot of them while you're at it; just as well to have them stacked handy; no point in leaving them in the ship. And some cases of food, and bottles of water, and—"

"Steady on," I protested. "We shan't be going on a week's expedition right away. All I expect to do tomorrow is try the thing out, and perhaps have a short flip over to see what that dark line is. We can take the dome and some food against an emergency, but there's no point in loading up useless extra weight."

"Tomorrow?" he repeated. "I thought—I mean, there's about five hours of light yet . . ."

"Possibly," I admitted, "but I've just done nearly three hours steady work in a space-suit. If you are so anxious to hurry it on, you try a shift on the job yourself."

I had scarcely expected him to rise to that, and he didn't. Instead, he watched me for a minute or two without speak-

ing, while I collected some food. Then he went back to looking out of the window. He'd stand there, motionless, peering intently for a time, then he would suddenly turn his head quickly from side to side, like a spectator watching an unnaturally fast rally at a tennis-match, and draw his breath in quickly. After that, there would be another motionless interlude for a bit. I was already on edge from the spell outside, and it soon began to get on my nerves.

"You won't see anything," I told him. "Come over here, and have some food."

Rather surprisingly, he came without demur.

"I suppose you told them to keep out of sight," he said. "Well, they're doing it, but they aren't fooling me."

"Oh, for God's sake—!" I began, letting my temper slip a bit at last.

"All right—all right," he said, hurriedly. "Perhaps *they* told *you* not to let on about them. It doesn't matter, really. Comes to the same thing."

I gave up trying to follow that, and simply grunted.

During the rest of the meal, and after it, we maintained a state of tactful truce, but when this had been disturbed some five times by his leaping

to a port in an attempt to catch his Martians unaware, I was driven to suggesting a game of chess to keep our attention occupied. It worked pretty well, too. For a time he seemed to forget all about hostile Martians, played a well-considered game, and beat me by a better margin than usual. At the end of it, things felt much more normal until he remarked:

"That's just it, you see. You Martians are cunning, all right, but not quite cunning enough. We can beat you every time, if we put our minds to it."

The next morning I went outside, and finished checking over the platform, then I got a couple of fuel containers out of the hold-section, and mounted them. Camilo, watching through the port, repeated on the helmet radio his suggestion of unloading them all. I appreciated that by lightening the ship there would be an advantage when it came to an attempt to raise her to the vertical, but they were heavy, and I did not see why I should do all the work—that part could wait until Camilo was in a state where he was willing to come out and help. I did add a case of food, a couple of bottles of water—and also the

two-man Flandrys Dome, for it isn't much good carrying rations against an emergency unless you also provide somewhere to take off your helmet so that you can eat them. And then there had to be the recompression gear to deflate the dome after use, and a matter of half-a-dozen small standby airbottles for the suits. Altogether, it took me nearly an hour to stow and make fast that lot, but then, at last, I was ready to make a test. And Camilo still hadn't moved from the port.

I stepped aboard, and told Camilo to stand by and observe. I tried the under-jets individually first, and they all responded satisfactorily. Then I put them in concert. The platform throbbed, and a large cloud of red dust blew out from beneath it. It lifted, slightly up by the rear right-hand corner. I trimmed, and leveled her off about eighteen inches above the ground; then, when she was stabilized, took her up to ten feet. At that height I slanted and slid her a bit in each direction, and she answered well. She felt more solid and steadier than a lunar-type platform; a little less sensitive, too—better than the other way, I thought. I raised her to a hun-

dred feet or so, with a smooth lift.

From there I had a real view. The dark line was revealed as no longer just a line, but as a wide stretch of darker ground reaching away into the distance. To the north and to the south the desert was spread out in utter monotony, but on the eastern horizon there were hills—once mountains, perhaps, but now ground down and rounded off, like very old molars.

I reported to Camilo, but he was not interested in the landscape. He demanded:

"Can you see any of *them*?"

"No," I told him. "There aren't any."

"I don't believe you."

"Very well. Just put on a spacesuit, and come up and see for yourself," I suggested.

"Oh, no, you don't. I wasn't born yesterday. That's how you got Geoff."

"What the hell are you talking about? I *am* Geoff," I protested.

"It's no good trying that on me. I know your game, and it's not going to work this time."

"But look here, Camilo—"

"I know what happened. When poor old Geoff went outside soon after we landed, you were waiting for him. You jumped him, invaded

him, turned the real Geoff out, and you've just been using his body as a disguise. But I spotted you right away. Now you want to get me outside so that another of you can do the same to me. Well, you aren't going to bring that off. Poor old Geoff hadn't been warned, but I have; so it won't work."

I started to bring the platform down.

"Camilo," I told him, "stop talking a lot of ridiculous nonsense, there's a good fellow. If you don't know me after being cooped up with me all these weeks, you damned well ought to. I never heard such a fantastic, rubbishy—"

"Oh, you put up a very good show," said Camilo, generously. "Very cunning you are—but it's just because I *do* know Geoff so well that I could spot you."

I hovered at a foot or so, and let her down gently. She made a nice easy touch, though she blew a cartload of dust about.

"I've seen through your little idea, too," he went on. "You've spotted a chance to get away from this God-forsaken planet. And I don't blame you; anybody in his senses would do his best to get off this ball of sand. So you want to take over this

ship, and get to Earth on her. But you aren't going to do it. Not this time, you're not. Not while I'm here."

I tried my most authoritative voice.

"Lieutenant Botoes," I ordered, "put on a suit, and come out here."

He laughed.

"Think you've got me, don't you? You toppled the ship over, and killed Raul, then you pushed Geoff out of himself, and took him over. I'm the only obstacle now, aren't I? But you haven't got me yet. I'll soon show you."

Then there was a clang that hurt my ears. I guessed he had been holding the helmet to speak into its radio, and had now dropped it. Then I saw the outer door of the lock swing shut. I ran to it, and battered on it, telling him not to be a fool. I had the winding-key to open it from outside, but it would be no good trying that for a minute or more—to attempt it while the automatic mechanism was still securing it would simply have taken me round with the handle.

I went to the port. It was just a little too high for me to see in, so I jumped, in order to get a glimpse of what he was up to. At the same mo-

ment the port went blank as the cover closed.

I hurried back to the airlock door, put the key in, and began to wind the locking-bolts back. The telltale inside must have shown him what I was up to, for the key suddenly reversed in my hands as the mechanism started again. I swore, and snatched it out.

"Camilo!" I called, hoping my voice would reach him from the dropped helmet. "Camilo, you've got it all wrong. Don't be a damned fool! Let me in!"

His only reply was, very faintly, a jeering laugh.

"Camilo—" I was beginning again, when suddenly the ship trembled, and there was a huge spurt of dust and sand, forward. I hadn't a moment's doubt what that meant, and I ran for my life.

Even encumbered with the suit, I covered the ground with great, leaping strides a dozen yards long, and was some eighty yards away in a few seconds, before I misjudged my step, and fell.

Still sprawling, I looked back at the *Figurao*. A cloud of dust and sand was spurting from beneath her forepart. Some of the grit was pattering on my helmet. As I watched, the forepart swayed, and then lifted clear of the

ground. Most of the loose stuff had been blown away, and I could see the ship better now; well enough to guess what Camilo was trying to do. The three lowermost steering-jets were blasting fiercely as they lifted her nose. I could see the idea, but I doubted whether he would get enough thrust out of those small jets to push her back to the vertical.

He turned up the power, and she lifted a little more on the two exposed legs of the tripod; no longer nose-down, but tilted a little above the horizontal.

I judged he had the jets on full power. They were holding her up; making a third supporting leg, but they weren't raising her nose any further. I suddenly understood why he had been so anxious to have the platform out of her, and the fuel, and the rest of the stuff, too. Freed of them, she might just have had power enough, but with most of the gear still aboard, she was still inclined only very slightly above the horizontal. The jets kept on roaring and gushing, but still they gave her no more lift. I wondered if it was the leg that had broken through the crust that was keeping her anchored. Clearly she was not going to be able to make it . . .

Then the main drive fired! Crazy . . . crazy!

I suppose he thought that, if he could tear the buried leg free, the side-jets would be able to tilt her nose skyward.

She leapt forward, almost horizontal, and with the pediment of the trailing leg dragging a furrow through the sand, like a huge ploughshare. She dipped by the head, bounced her belly on the sand, rose again on the supporting side-jets, and he let the main drive have it again. There was a tremendous spurt.

By God, it was well tried! For a moment I thought he had done it. She lifted until the foot of the trailing leg was barely touching the sand. She was accelerating fast, but at such an angle to me that I could see little more than a cloud of dust with an exhaust flare in the middle of it.

She must, I suppose, have dipped again—and touched. I can't say. All I saw was the silver shape leaping suddenly above the dust cloud, turning over and over in the air, with her drive still flaring. She fell back into the dust, and bounced to appear again; she didn't go so high, and she was spinning differently this time. Then once more she disappeared, and the dust and the

sand sprayed up, looking like a shellburst at sea . . .

I put down my head, hugged myself to the ground, and waited . . . She was, I guessed, nearly three miles away by now, but that was unpleasantly close for the kind of explosion I was expecting. I held my breath as I waited . . . and waited . . .

The explosion did not come.

At last, I looked up, cautiously. Of the *Figurao* herself I could see nothing. There was just a dust-cloud—with a red flare still burning steadily in the middle of it.

I went on waiting. Nothing happened except that the lighter dust was blown away, and the cloud grew smaller. After some more minutes I risked standing up. Scarcely taking my eyes from the spot, I made my way back to the platform. I found it half-buried in sand thrown up by the *Figurao's* blast, but it lifted all right, and the sand slid off as I tilted it and slid it away to a safer distance, to land again.

For over an hour I sat on the platform, watching. Gradually the loose sand and dust had been blown away, and I could see the silver glint of the ship herself, and the steady flame from her tubes.

I realized that somehow,

perhaps on the first bounce, the main drive had been reduced to a pretty low power, or the ship would have gone a lot further and fared a lot worse, but I still did not know whether she was going to blow up or not—and, if not, how long the fuel would continue to burn at the present setting.

Perhaps Camilo had been able to check the power at the moment of the first bounce, but he could have had no chance after that. One could not imagine even strapped to the couch, as he would be, either he himself, or the gimbal system could have withstood what the *Figurao* had been through . . .

And at that thought I was suddenly swept by the terrifying realization that, whether the ship blew up or not, I was now alone . . .

Almost in the same moment I became aware again of the hostile desert all around. I began to feel the awfulness of utter desolation stalking in on me once more . . .

I pulled the two-man dome off the platform, and set it up. Flimsy though it was, one could find some illusion of protection inside it. The howling of the wilderness was not quite so close to my elbow; the

prowling of the agoraphobic monsters was kept a little further off . . .

The day wore on. The puny red sun declined, and disappeared. The constellations shone out, familiar still, for against the panorama of the heavens the leap from Earth to Mars is the tiniest of hops. One day, I am sure, the constellations will look different, when our hops have indeed become great leaps—for me, that is an article of faith—but it won't be for a long time yet. . . .

The night closed down. Through the dome's small windows all but the stars was dark—except at one point where, across miles of sand, I could see the glow of the *Figurao's* main jet, still flaring where she lay.

I broke open a packet of rations, and ate some food. I felt no hunger, but the familiarity of the simple act of eating held some comfort. The food did me good, too. It gave me strength, and I felt better able to resist. Then, suddenly, I became aware of silence . . .

Looking out of the window again, I saw that the flare of the rocket-tube had vanished. There was nothing but blackness and the stars. All sound had ceased, and left such a

silence as was never known on Earth. Nor was it just that, not just the negative absence of sound; the silence was hard, positive, a quality of eternity itself. It rang in one's ears until they sought relief by hearing sounds that did not exist; murmurings, far-off bells, sighs not so far off, tickings, whispers, faint ululations . . .

A bit of verse that my grandfather used to quote came into my mind:

*. . . for all the night
I heard their thin gnat-voices
cry
Star to faint star across the
sky,*

and I seemed to hear them, too: they had no words, they were on the threshold of sound, but they encouraged me . . .

And, God knows, I needed encouragement, as I crouched there in my flimsy dome . . .

The voices cry—but the elemental terrors prowl. We need numbers to sustain us; in numbers we can dispel the terrors; alone, we are weak, mutilated. Taken from our pool of corporate strength we gasp, we wriggle defenselessly while the terrors circle round, slowly closing in . . .

Perhaps the voices are just

sirens—but I think not. I think they are the calls of destiny, leading, not luring, onward and outward. I think we shall, we must, follow them—but not like this! Never again like this! Not, oh, God—alone . . . !

The little sun rode over the horizon like a delivering knight. I almost knelt in worship of him as he drove the fingering terrors from my side—not away, but further off, giving me the room, and the courage, to move.

I had meant to eat again, but I could not wait for that. I craved only for the security of the ship. I put my helmet on with shaking hands, packed the dome aboard the platform, lifted to a few feet, and sped across the sands towards the *Figurao* as fast as I could.

Two of the tripod legs were twisted and bent, and the third torn off, but the hull was surprisingly little damaged. I had to clear a lot of sand to get at the airlock as the ship now lay. Much of it I managed to blow away with the platform's jets, but the rest I had to scrape out.

The lock worked perfectly. Inside the ship there was far less damage than I had expected—except to poor Camilo.

I take some pride in having been able to force myself outside again to bury him, as I had buried Raul. I knew that it must be done at once if I were to be able to face it at all so, somehow, I did it. And then hurried back . . .

It was after that that the gap comes—a long gap, according to the calendar-clock. It looks as if I spent some part of it trying to repair the radio-transmitter; for some reason I seem to have rigged up a light to shine out of each port; the platform is still outside, but not quite as I left it when I first came in . . . Probably there are other things . . . I don't know . . . I can't remember . . .

Perhaps someone will come eventually . . .

I have food enough for nearly three years . . .

Food enough—but not, I fear, spirit enough . . .

There is a letter here for my dear Isabella. Give it to her, please. . . .

THE END

Lots of people think they can beat the races. Willy Dunstan knew he could. But in the long run, no nutty inventor's gimmick is going to be able to

Replace The Horse

By LARRY M. HARRIS

THE only trouble with Willy Dunstan was that he was a scientist. Of course, things wouldn't have been so bad if he'd only been a fair-to-middling scientist, or even a downright poor one. But no. Willy had to be a good scientist. That was what ruined him, and ruined me, too.

My name's Arthur Holly, and by profession I'm a trainer. It's my job to see that the horses are always in shape, always ready to go at whatever track happens to be open. And I'm pretty good, too. If I hadn't been good I'd never have had the idea of going into business for myself, and none of this would have happened.

But, you see, I got the chance to buy this plug . . .

A plug is a decrepit horse,

of no use to anybody and damn little use to himself. Naturally, the animal wasn't described to me as a plug. Greg called him a Business Opportunity. "This is your chance to start your own stable," he said. "This horse is a winner, going at a sacrifice price—confidentially, the owner doesn't realize what he's got and he just wants to get rid of the animal at a good price."

Naturally, that made me suspicious right from the start, and when I saw the horse I was more than suspicious; I was sick. Greg had done his best to spruce the poor thing up, but you can't disguise a swaybacked, emptybellied, crosseyed old plug enough so I can't tell what it is.

"I tell you the horse is a terrific buy," Greg whispered to me behind his hand. The animal was up for auction, of course. Not that there were many buyers. I was there with Greg, a couple of small owners were there trying to look smart and calculating, and a tall, thin guy with glasses and no hair was there, too.

"He's a terrific buy for a glue factory," I said, and sat on my hands. I watched the horse go, at last, for one hundred and thirty-five dollars, and I thought no more about it. I'd wasted an afternoon, but it was my own fault. I should have listened to that little voice inside that starts to talk to me whenever Greg comes around.

I did notice that the buyer was the tall, thin guy with the glasses and no hair. But what was that to me? Nothing.

Until Greg came along a couple of days later. "I know a guy who's looking for a trainer," he told me.

I was clocking Blue Joy at the time, and I didn't answer him until she'd crossed the finish line: a beautiful mare, three years old with the wind and staying power of a colt. A winner if I ever saw one.

I pushed the stopwatch shut and turned around. "I'm *working* for a guy who needs a trainer," I said.

"This guy I know," Greg said, "he wants to make his trainer half-owner of the stables. Would I come to you if it wasn't a good deal?"

Well, of course he would. I reminded him of the plug I'd gone down to buy.

"Now, that's a funny coincidence," Greg said, and I laid back my ears and got ready to run. Greg's funny coincidences are the only things in the world that mean more trouble than his Business Opportunities. But Greg didn't notice; he went right on. "Remember the guy who bought that plug?"

The tall thin guy with the g. and the no h. Sure, I remembered him.

"Well, he's the guy who wants a trainer-owner," Greg said.

Oh, fine. I didn't want to work with the plug I'd seen, and any guy who'd buy that one probably had a stable full of equally sad animals.

"He's a scientist," Greg said. "He's got some new ideas."

And that didn't make me feel any happier, let me tell you. I know enough of those college-trained characters; we

have had them as stableboys and walkers, and every notion in their heads is just more sawdust and nonsense. Never saw a college boy yet who made a good horse handler. Never expect to see one. And a scientist with lots of new ideas didn't sound good.

"At least come down and see him," Greg said. "What can you lose?"

"An afternoon," I said. But I came.

Why?

God only knows. I know this much: I wish I hadn't.

The guy who'd bought the plug was a scientist, all right. For a track and stables he'd bought an old sinkhole of a place the former owner had been trying to get rid of for ten years; the ground was rocky and got kind of swampy during wet weather. He had five animals, all of them horrible plugs like the one I'd seen him buy. He led that one out to the track, saddled up, climbed on and handed me down a pair of binoculars. "Follow the horse with these," he said.

"I'm standing trackside," I said. "What do I need with binocs?"

"Don't argue," he said. "Follow the horse with these. Time me if you want to. But

keep the glasses trained on the horse."

And he started off. I figured I might as well humor the guy, and I watched him through the binocs as he went around. He was a hell of a jockey. He sat straight as a poker in the saddle, with a kind of frightened expression on his face, and he kept one hand on the reins and one on his glasses so they wouldn't fall off. It was something to see.

Only it wasn't funny.

That plug, carrying a jockey who weighed maybe a hundred and sixty, sixty-five pounds, a full saddle, and weight distributed all wrong because the guy was sitting so stiff, went around the crazy, stony track like a piece of the wind.

By my clock, he beat Blue Joy's time.

I didn't believe it. But it had happened.

When the tall thin guy climbed off the horse he was beaming, and he looked a little relieved. He was also winded, and it took him a second to catch his breath. Then he said: "Want to join me? How about it?"

I said: "What kind of dope are you using, mister?"

"No dope," he told me.

Greg was standing nearby.

"I told you this was something big," he said.

"It's big, all right," I told him. "And it's pretty illegal, too. Thanks, but I don't want to spend the next ten years in jail. I have a job, and a trade. I want to keep them."

"There's nothing illegal about it," the tall thin guy said. "By the way, my name is Dunstan. Call me Willy."

"I'm Arthur Holly," I said, "and I'm leaving. Call me a taxi."

"Don't be that way," Greg put in. "Listen to the man."

"The secret is in the binoculars," Dunstan said. "They are really a setup for beamed power transmission. It's built into the barrels of the binoculars."

I blinked. "You mean you put electricity into the horse?" I said.

"Not at all," he said, and grinned at me. "There's a printed circuit under the saddle. The beam powers it."

"Printed circuit?" I said.

"Antigravity," he said.

Brother!

But there wasn't any doubt about it. Willy Dunstan, glasses and all, really had something. He'd invented antigravity, but he didn't see why he should give it to the government or something,

and not make any money out of it. With the patent laws the way they are (anyhow, this is the way he explained it to me) he probably couldn't even get a patent on the thing, since it was only a new application of existing art. Or something. So he had to figure out some way of making money out of antigravity without letting anybody know what he had.

Horseracing was the answer, of course.

Put the circuit under the saddle, using printed stuff so it doesn't bulk and cause embarrassing questions, power it from a pair of binocs in the stands, and the saddle doesn't weigh a thing. Neither does the jockey. The horse is running free, unweighted.

No wonder the plug made time.

And no wonder Greg was excited. This was a way to win races.

"I wanted a trainer to avoid suspicion," Dunstan told me. "I've got to make this look good. I can talk about new scientific methods of training to explain why my horses win."

"Sure," I said. I felt kind of blank.

"But I needed a man I could trust," he said. "Greg,

here, told me you were that man."

"What does Greg get out of it?"

"A commission from me," he said, "for providing me with a trainer."

I couldn't understand why Greg would be content to take a commission and get out. Not then, I couldn't. I'd figured I had a pretty good deal: no work to speak of, and a half-ownership in the surest stables this side of Mexico City. Greg grinned at me and—God call me down for a stupid idiot—I grinned right back.

It was a little later, when we were alone, that I managed to convince Dunstan to hire a jockey. He was all for riding the plug himself but, as I pointed out, he did not look like a jockey, he had no license, and there wasn't a chance in hell of his getting one. He agreed, and I called in an old friend of mine named Teddy Wills to take the job. He got one look at the plug and swore up and down that he would never be seen in public on the thing, but I fast-talked Teddy, too, and after all we were old friends. He trusted me.

We spent a week just getting things ready, readjusting the machine to Teddy's weight, and then we entered

the plug (which we'd named First Hope, after a lot of discussion) in a California race.

The odds were thirteen to one going in, and they rose right up to thirty to one as soon as the public got a look at poor swaybacked First Hope. They were on their way out of sight when the board closed.

I sat in the stands with Dunstan. He had money down on the race, of course, though I didn't; as half-owner, the profits on the stables were half mine, and betting on the horse you train is bad luck.

Dunstan held the binocs. His hands shook a little and once, before the race, he turned to me and said: "I hope nothing goes wrong," which frightened me a little bit stiff, since I wasn't figuring anything *could* go wrong.

The starting bell went and First Hope was away, leading the pack.

Even knowing what I knew, it was hard to believe my eyes. That horrible old plug made it in three lengths ahead of a colt with a fine reputation, and four and a half lengths ahead of the favorite, who ended in show position.

Naturally, there was an investigation.

But there was no real trouble. Dunstan and his "scientific methods of training," my honest face and the fact that there were no visible gimmicks either on the horse or in his bloodstream or saliva convinced the track judges. The win stayed on the books.

And we headed out of California for a Nevada track opening.

The reputation of good old First Hope had preceded us, of course. I wanted Dunstan to use another nag, but he told me that building the printed-circuit saddles was expensive in both time and money; he wanted to barrel up a pretty large stake first, and he was keeping the other horses, meanwhile, in reserve.

So First Hope ran again—at slightly lower odds. They weren't as much lower as you'd think, though; people just couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the animal, and figured the California win had to be a fluke.

It was no fluke. This time First Hope made four lengths in front of the place horse, and we were well on the way to becoming rich.

We stayed in Nevada for the last race, living in the stables for fear somebody would take a notion to exam-

ine the gimmicked saddle with more than ordinary care. Teddy was in on the secret, of course—he had to be, because anti-gravity makes you feel pretty funny, Dunstan explained. Teddy had to know what was going on underneath him.

And he was the most worried of us all. "Something terrible's going to happen," he said. "I can feel it. There's something terrible in the air."

Now, living in the stables, there was only one answer to that, and I gave it to him. But he wouldn't be dissuaded. By this time I was feeling pretty confident, and Dunstan, of course, was on top of the world.

"We'll race here tomorrow," he told me, "and then head East for the track openings there. Later we'll take the Derby..."

I just didn't see any way we could lose. Naturally, I was wrong.

We got into the stands, just before race time, and they were crowded. First Hope's crazy reputation had gotten around, and guys who normally have been at their local bookmaking parlor had come out to the track to see for themselves. Dunstan found himself next to a big beefy

guy with a red face and blinking eyes, who couldn't talk about anything except "that nutty horse out there." We kept our mouths shut, of course. If we'd let on that we owned "that nutty horse," we'd have been snowed under with questions and comments.

The starting gate swung open.

First Hope swung wide and came out in front. Dunstan was following her with the gimmicked binocs, and I had an ordinary pair of my own. Coming around the first turn, First Hope was a length and a half in front of the pack, and going away. He hit the far turn two lengths ahead of the favorite, a wonderful horse named Germont's Love, who was running his best that day. But nothing could stop our weightless wonder.

"Hey, will you look at that nutty horse go!" the beefy guy yelled. I felt like yelling myself. We'd sunk all the profits into this race; with two wins under our belts we felt pretty safe about it.

First Hope came around the far turn, then Germont's Love, and then the pack. The distance was widening between First Hope and the rest of the field.

"Hey, look at that plug!"

the beefy guy shouted, and dug Dunstan in the ribs.

That did it.

Dunstan, off balance, swayed and nearly fell. For one full second the gimmicked binocs were off First Hope.

Mine were trained right on the animal—but they didn't do any good, of course. They were just normal binocs.

Have you ever seen a horse collapse?

All of a sudden, about a hundred and forty pounds landed on First Hope's back. The antigravity machine had no power. First Hope felt all the weight we'd been holding off him.

He actually went on his knees. I could see Teddy looking frantic and using his whip, but nothing was going to do any good. I got one clear look at First Hope's face. I've never seen such a surprised and discouraged-looking horse.

Germont's Love passed him almost at once. So did the rest of the pack. By the time Dunstan managed to get his binocs off the infield and onto First Hope again, it was too late. Run? First Hope could barely breathe.

So we lost our money. So that wasn't too bad.

But this time the investigation got us. First Hope's sud-

den collapse had looked even funnier than his previous two runaway wins, and the judges took that saddle apart with a fine-tooth comb. They found the circuitry.

Dunstan's working for the government now, and wondering how he's ever going to make any money on the lousy salary they pay. Teddy's down in Mexico City being a

jockey, since he was outlawed here.

Me? I'm a trainer. A good trainer.

You ever go out to the amusement park? Take your kids for a ride on the Shetland ponies?

Say hello to me, next time. Hell, it's a living, isn't it?

But if it wasn't for science . . .

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

An **UNEXPECTED** climax brings a blazing end to the saga of the Troons of Space, as famed author John Wyndham carries us to the far reaches of the galaxy.



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*She was the Galaxy's most beautiful whore.
He knew that if he went to her couch during
the time-storm, he, too, would be booking*

PASSAGE TO GOMORRAH

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

EVEN for a lady of the stars, the Lady Berenice was beautiful. Her short blonde hair made Cross think of Martian maize, and her blue eyes, set wide apart in her tanned, oval face, reminded him of the ice lakes of Frigidia. Her tall, Junoesque body put to shame the pornographic photographs he had seen of it, cheapened the lurid passages he had read about it; betrayed, as yet, no evidence of her apostasy.

He wondered who her lover was, and why she had refused to reveal him.

When the Jacob's lift matched levels with the *Pandora's* lock, she stepped lightly into the ship beside him. The corporation officer who had accompanied her, handed him her papers, then signalled

to the longstarmen below. After a moment the lift and its sole occupant sank from sight.

"How soon do we blast?" the Lady Berenice asked.

She was looking at Cross intently, as though trying to probe beyond the bleak grayness of his eyes. "In about fifteen minutes, my lady," he said.

She nodded, stepped into the ship proper. He sealed the lock and escorted her up the spiral companionway to her cabin.

She paused in the doorway. "I'd like my luggage, please."

"I'll bring it up as soon as we're in *A Priori*, my lady. Right now, I'll have to insist that you strap yourself on the acceleration couch."

He watched as she did his

bidding. "You can get up as soon as the 'all clear' signal sounds," he said presently.

She nodded again, not in the least perturbed. He wondered if she'd be equally calm if "acceleration couch" was something more than a hand-me-down term from pre-degravitation days; if she'd be equally composed if she had to contend with 3 or 4 g's, instead of just the temporary instability of blast-off.

She probably would be, he decided. A miscarriage would not affect her banishment to Gomorrah, but it would save her the unpleasantness of having to give birth to a mutant.

He excused himself and headed for the control room.

A Priori drive, once activated, required no supervision except in cases of emergency. The *Pandora* was only a one-passenger-one-pilot job, but Falcon Lines, Inc., had a reputation throughout the civilized sector of the galaxy for fast, efficient service, and even its smallest ships boasted the latest in automatic equipment.

Cross secured the control-room door behind him, made his way leisurely down the spiral companionway to the hold, where the WineWomen-andSong longstarmen had deposited the Lady Berenice's

luggage. Even in the artificial $\frac{1}{2}$ g, the two bags were heavy, and he was breathing a little hard when he halted before her door.

He knocked. "Yes?" she answered, her voice muffled by the sound of running water.

"Your luggage, my lady."

The sound of running water ceased, and presently she opened the door. She had wrapped a ship's towel deftly around her torso. It was a white towel that enhanced the hue of her clear, tanned skin. Water glistened on her golden shoulders, ran in twinkling rivulets down her coppery thighs and calves. "Set them inside, please."

Cross complied. She did not move an inch, and his arm, despite his efforts to avoid touching her, brushed her thigh. He withdrew quickly. His arm tingled and his hands were trembling. He kept his eyes averted because he knew what she would read in them. "If you wish anything further, I'll be in my cabin," he said. He turned to go.

"Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

"How—how long will we be in *A Priori*?"

"A little over four hours, ship's time."

"Is—is there any likelihood of a time storm?"



Amidst the storm and confusion she beckoned to him.

The question surprised him. Passengers, especially passengers of the Lady Berenice's status, did not usually concern themselves with the exigencies of space travel. They took it for granted, unless otherwise apprised, that such exigencies did not exist. "There is always a chance of a time storm," he said. "But don't worry, my lady. If the conditions for one are present, we will be contacted by the port authority in time to avoid it."

"But suppose something should go wrong. Suppose we weren't informed in time and did get involved in one. What would happen then?"

He could not keep his eyes averted forever, and he forced himself to meet her gaze. He was mildly shocked to see that a quantity of her composure had left her, that there was a certain diffidence in the expression on her face.

Presently: "As you may know, my lady," he said, "*A Priori* is merely the result of the separation of pure space and pure time from the thing-in-itself, or from basic reality. Once separated, pure space can be contracted to the extent where a parsec equals .59 kilometers. Usually pure time contracts accordingly, but sometimes there is a slight discrepancy, and certain

phases of *A Priori* contain more time than space. If we should become involved in one of these phases—or storms, if you like—we would lose our awareness of our objective reality and proceed to relive a subjective and sporadic playback of our pasts. So all that could happen to us, actually, are the things that have already happened to us—with the difference that we would relive not only our own experiences, but one another's as well; in pure time, individuality does not exist."

"But wouldn't our objective reality be affected?"

He nodded. "It *could* be," he said, "since, in the absence of any real passage of time, it would be in temporal ratio to our involvement in our pasts, which might force it into a different time plane altogether."

She dropped her eyes. "Then—then in spite of what you said before, something could happen after all—something that hasn't happened before."

"I suppose so, my lady . . . Will that be all?"

"Yes—for now."

"I'll be in my cabin . . ."

"Cabin" was a euphemism for "cubicle." The cramped compartment adjoining the

control room contained a couch, a desk, a small microfilm library and a well-stocked liquor cabinet, but that was about all. Cross opened the cabinet and poured himself a generous brandy. He drank it fast, then he lay down on the couch and tried to sleep. He always slept out the *A Priori* phases of his runs if they were under eight hours, but he had a good idea that he was going to have a hard time sleeping this one out. He was right. The minute he closed his eyes he saw a white towel and a golden sunrise of shoulders; two breath-taking colonnades of tanned, glistening flesh— There was no sleeping after that.

He swore aloud. Surely she must realize that an ordinary pilot like himself couldn't afford her. Then why had she deliberately exhibited her deluxe charms? Why had she deliberately delayed him at her door with so obviously false an excuse as a discussion of the unstable phase of *A Priori*? He was certainly not naive enough to think that, just because she was a *fallen* lady of the stars, she would waive her fee. If fourteen years in space had taught him nothing else, it had taught him that any extraterrestrial act

of love was a business transaction and nothing more.

Still—

He turned angrily on his side, tried to shut her from his mind. She can go to hell, he thought—

But she didn't. She went to New America, instead. He accosted her on a sunny avenue in Little Chicago and they turned, hand in hand, down a narrow street lined with transplanted maples. The season was spring, and the warm air had activated the thermostatically controlled Hi-Fi's hidden in the foliage, and the air was filled with the singing of robins. After a while they came to a shaded walk that wound up to a secluded cottage, and they walked through scented coolness to the door. He noticed, then, that all the while they'd been walking, she'd been wearing nothing but a towel; and it must have been raining, too, despite the sunshine, for her shoulders were glistening with raindrops, and raindrops twinkled on her long, tanned legs—

He was sitting up on the couch. He was sweating. "I'll be damned!" he said. There was a persistent bell-like sound in his ears, and presently he recognized it as the beeping of the communicator. He got up, then, and

went into the control room and picked up the neatly typed message which the receiver had emitted:

*From: Port Authority, Wine-
Women and Song, Thais
To: Nathaniel Cross, Pandora
A Priori disturbance reported
bulding up in path of your
reality-flow. Emerge into
normal space at once and
await further instructions.
Acknowledge.*

Cross stared at the words. Was the Lady Berenice clairvoyant? Had she *known* there was going to be a storm?

He hurried toward the control panel. Suddenly he thought of the towel again, the towel and the deliberate shower. He tried to tell himself that there was nothing unethical in a lady of the stars trying to work off her passage, but it didn't do any good, and his anger kept intensifying till it superseded his common sense, till it transformed him from a seasoned pilot into a frustrated schoolboy. The control panel simply hadn't been designed to be operated by a frustrated schoolboy, and when his fingers sought to punch out the pattern that would snap the *Pandora* back into normal space, they punched, instead,

a set of symbols sufficiently unintelligible to activate the alarm.

The alarm performed a two-fold function: it alerted authorized persons and, at the same time, it temporarily incapacitated the particular unauthorized person who had triggered it. Cross staggered back against the bulkhead, his fingers tingling from the automatic shock, his body going numb. He slid slowly to the deck, still conscious but unable to move his limbs.

The first wave of the storm struck, and the ship began to shimmer. Lying there, watching the room dissolve around him, he experienced a strange interval of detachment, and he wondered curiously how much he really knew about himself: whether the outrageous mistake he had just made had been the result of his anger, or whether his anger had merely been a trumped-up excuse for making the mistake; whether the entire action had not resulted from a masochistic desire to participate in the Lady Berenice's past. . . .

The tree was much taller than he had thought, and he wished now that he hadn't been in such a hurry to join the club. He had swum the

river all right, and he had gone through Devil's Cave without flinching. But you could conquer your fear of water. You could conquer your fear of darkness—

Height was something different.

He shinnied a little higher on the trunk, gazed yearningly up to the last fork, where the highest limb began its graceful journey into the summer sky. He heard the taunts of the other boys from the meadow below. They did not think he could make it. In a way, they didn't want him to make it. If he made it, they wouldn't have anyone to pick on till another new boy moved to town.

Well, he'd show them!

He shinnied furiously for several seconds, then paused again. He was tired, and his chest hurt. His shins smarted from repeated scraping against the trunk.

He looked up at the fork again. It was quite close now, perhaps close enough. He reached up with one arm, managed to wrap it around the larger of the two limbs. After a moment he reinforced his hold with his other arm. He started to pull his body upward, shinnying with his legs. For a while he thought he was going to make it, then his

left arm cramped and his right, unable to support his weight, began to slip.

He screamed as he started to fall, but in his desperation he managed to transfer his good arm back to the trunk and keep his legs in position, so that he didn't really fall, he slid, instead, down the trunk to the limb he had left a short time before. He glimpsed the ground, far below, and the height caught up to him once and for all, and he locked his body around the limb and clung there, whimpering.

Presently, he saw one of the other boys start climbing the tree to bring him down, and he heard his new nickname being bandied about on the meadow—

"Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross!"

"Gee, Dad, are you going on *another* trip?"

"Sure thing," her father said, looking up from his open suitcase.

"But—but you just got back."

His face looked funny, the way it always did after he and mother had been mouth-fighting—as though he wanted it to look one way and his muscles wanted it to look a totally different way, and he had had to settle for an expression

halfway in-between. "Sorry, Berenice, have to go again."

"But—"

"Now, don't cry, darling. Please don't cry."

But she cried anyway, she had to. What else could you do when you'd planned all spring for the halcyon summer days and the treks through the woods, the fishing and the campsite, the little fire burning brightly and your father sitting beside you in the serene summer night?

He was on his knees and he was holding her close, and now his face made her think of one of those balloons with faces painted on them that you blew up and twisted into different shapes, only not quite the same, because balloons couldn't cry—

"I'll write you, darling. Be a good girl now, and mind your mother."

The other boys were standing on the corner, waiting for him to pass. He gripped his galactic geography book tightly and he held his mouth firm, and he made his legs behave as though he wanted them to keep right on walking, as though the thought of flight was remote from his thoughts.

"Here comes Eberhardt Cross!"

"Hi, Eberhardt!"

"Climb any trees lately, Eberhardt?"

"Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross!"

He kept right on walking. If he stopped it would be worse. They wouldn't settle for mere words then—and there were five of them, and he was only one, and not much of a one at that.

But he thought: I'll show them. I'll show them if it takes me the rest of my life!

"Come in," her mother said, and the tall, handsome man stepped out of the summer night and into the scented living room. "I'm so glad you could drop by . . . Run out and play now, Berenice, like a good little girl. You've been cooped up in the house all day. . . ."

Miss Tenthyear's android eyes beamed brightly as she assumed her lecture-posture by the desk. "Our final subject for today, class," she said, "will be the story of Captain Alexander Eberhardt."

"Your mothers and fathers have probably mentioned his name many times, and they've probably told you about how he piloted the first spaceship to the moon, had a nervous breakdown after he crashed there, and babbled for days

over the world-wide radio hook-up, begging for someone, anyone, to save him. All of this is true, and Captain Eberhardt, in the eyes of the public, has never been considered a credit to his countrymen. But the bravest of men can collapse when sufficient pressure is applied, and Captain Eberhardt actually died a hero's death. We are all of us merely human, and we should keep this in mind when we pass judgment on our fellow men—"

He was conscious of the other kids looking at him out of the corners of their eyes, and he kept his own eyes focused on his desktop. *Eberhardt, Eberhart, Eberhardt Cross!* he could hear them calling him after the bell had sounded, after Miss Tenth-year had retired to her case behind the desk and had turned herself off. And he could hear his own voice now, his own voice deep inside him, silently shouting the old refrain, but with something added this time: "I'll show them! Space is a tree, in a way. Space is a tremendous tree reaching up into infinity, and I'll climb as high into it as I can get and I'll laugh back down at them in their silly suburban houses and I'll gather a handful of stars and

throw them down to Earth like shining acorns. . . .

Her tears had smeared the purple ink, making the passages of the letter illegible. But she had read them once, and once was enough to tell her that her father was never coming back, that his promises were the same old lies, his cheerful phrases the same old clichés, she had read a dozen—a hundred—times before.

How strange that she should remember him so well after eight interminable years, that she should still want him to come back. She had been a gawky girl of 10 when he had gone away for the last time; now she was a worldly young woman of 18—old enough, surely, to be above such childish needs as parental attachments—

She heard the doorbell ring downstairs, and the sound of male voices on the doorstep, and she knew her mother was in business again. She got up from her vanity and went over to the window and looked out at the summer night. There was an apple tree growing beside the house and the apple tree was in blossom. She turned off the electronic screen, reached out and broke off a nearby bough. She held it to her nostrils, rejoicing in

the sweetness and the purity of the blossoms.

She raised her eyes and saw the summer stars pulsing in the black immensity of the sky. She picked out the patterns of the constellations—the long straggling line of Scorpius, the riotous burgeoning of Sagittarius, the tetrahedron of Libra, the filmy blur of Coma Berenices . . . Subtly, what she breathed and what she saw, what she needed and what she had been denied, blended into a single impression, and she thought: A lady of the stars—that's what I'll be. A lady of the stars . . . And she saw herself, brightly-gowned and glamorous, stepping from star to star, the legions of her lovers following worshipfully behind her. She paused on a global cluster and glanced disdainfully down to the blue-green mote of Earth, and she thought contemptuously of her prosaic mother carrying on her petty assignments in her petty parlor, of her father absconding again and again from reality; then she laughed, and leaped lightly to the Greater Magellanic Cloud, where the Emperor of the Universe humbly awaited her. . . .

"But don't you see?" his father said. "Space is for misfits. A normal man simply

doesn't give up his rights as an Earth citizen, his right to marry and have children, just for the privilege of traveling to far-off places."

Cross shifted uncomfortably on the front steps. It was a clear night in August, and the stars were so bright and close that they seemed to brush the topmost branches of the maples lining the suburban street.

"Think about it, Nate," his father went on, puffing self-righteously on his suburban pipe. "You're still young. You're only 19. Why don't you wait for a while—a year, anyway. Maybe you'll change your mind by then."

Cross shook his head. "No," he said. "You don't understand. It's something I have to do . . . Something . . . I . . . have . . . to . . . do . . ."

Cross massaged his limbs, got slowly to his feet. The control room had regained solidity, but he was not fooled. The *Pandora* had merely reached the relatively stable center of the storm—the eye—and any attempt to throw her back into normal space now would tear her apart, along with everything and everyone on board, and the resultant particles, both inanimate and animate, would be scattered ir-

retrievably throughout the space-time continuum.

Suddenly he remembered his passenger, remembered her apprehension about time storms. He hurried toward her cabin, telling himself that it was his responsibility to be with her during the danger period, that it was his duty to protect her; and all the while he told himself, he knew that he was lying in his teeth, that there was no danger—only the embarrassment of having to share one's most intimate experiences with another—and that his presence was totally uncalled for.

She opened the door at his knock. One look into her eyes told him that she had been expecting him; one glance at her magnificent body, bereft, now, even of a towel, told him that he had to have her, no matter what the cost.

She drew him into the room and closed the door, and suddenly he knew that this was no ordinary business transaction, that she wanted him as desperately, almost, as he wanted her. He tried to understand, and a glimmering of the truth touched him; then he felt the warmth of her flesh, and then the moistness of her mouth on his, and he seemed to melt, to dissolve,

even as the room dissolved around him—the room and the ship and the present. . . .

"Before approving your application, I'm required to brief you," the male interviewer for Camellias, Inc., said. "We don't want any of our future ladies of the stars to look back some day and accuse us of coercing her into Camellia-activity . . . Do you know anything about the profession at all?"

"A little," Berenice said, nervously.

"A very little, I suspect . . . First of all, you must erase from your mind whatever detrimental associations you may have with your future calling. The ancient attitude towards prostitution still prevails on Earth, and probably will continue to prevail for centuries to come; but in space, even a common house-worker is a respected individual, while a full-fledged lady of the stars is the equivalent of a princess or a president's daughter. The 'World's Oldest Profession' has become the 'Galaxy's Noblest Profession'.

"Cosmic radiation, undistilled by the Earth's atmosphere is quite a different proposition from the distilled radiation which has bombarded mankind since birth. Pro-

longed exposure to it causes certain genic changes in both male and female chromosomes. Interplanetary travel, thanks to *A Priori*, occasioned only relatively brief periods of exposure; but interstellar travel is something else. Even with *A Priori*, the journeys between the stars sometimes require weeks, even months. As a result, no woman can ever enter interstellar space without first forfeiting her function as a woman—unless she wants to give birth to a mutant, or, to call a spade a spade, a monster.

"You are probably familiar with the Earth Council's famous Dual Decision of two generations ago: the decision to confine all interstellar personnel, during their sojourn on Earth, to the port areas; and the decision to set aside Polaris 2 as a haven for the monsters that had already been born and for those that might yet be born. But, however commendable it might have been in other respects, the Dual Decision evaded the most vital aspect of the problem—the need of men in space for the women they could no longer have.

"There was only one solution, and it was obvious from the first. But it was a solution

which a sex-conscious, sex-ridden, sex-frightened, sex-bewildered people, whose various religious credos classified sex, per se, as a sin, could not accept—except by degrees.

"The first free lance ladies of the stars were of French, Swedish and Japanese descent. They were followed by most of the other racial strains. Eventually their numbers increased to a point where the Earth Council could no longer ignore their activities and was forced either to combat the star-wide spread of the profession, or to legalize it and to encourage its function along with the time-honored lines of private enterprise. Legalization was inevitable, but still, had it not been for the lobbyists, it might have been irreparably delayed. I am proud to say that the founder of Camellias, Inc., was one of the most articulate and influential of those lobbyists, and it was probably due more to his efforts than to the efforts of the others, that the Prostitution Act of 2340 finally became a reality.

"The creation and maintenance of an interstellar red light system was a complex undertaking, but we need not go into it here. You'll be ade-

quately schooled in our history at our Martian convent—provided, of course, that you decide to join us. There are, however, two important details which I must call to your attention.

"The first is our caste system. The convents, which the various corporations have set up on Mars, have a common standard, based upon aptitude, personality and technique-achievement, that each prospective lady of the stars must attain in order to graduate. The degree to which she excels in these qualities, together with her physical qualifications, determines her classification, which in turn determines the rates she is allowed to charge for her future services.

"The second is pregnancy. Upon leaving Earth, you will be given a Farbes and Donniger contraceptive-field, guaranteed for life by its manufacturers. *Keep it with you at all times.* There is no excuse for any lady of the stars to suffer the ignominy of giving birth to a monster. The Earth Council has granted us, and the other corporations, the right to banish all our pregnant personnel, together with their lovers, to Polaris 2, and also has permitted us to give the planet the much more ap-

propriate name of 'Gomorrah'.

"As soon as you leave Earth, you will be required to take bi-monthly physicals. Don't try to avoid them; I assure you that you'll be apprehended immediately. However, you'll have nothing to worry about—provided you *keep your field with you at all times.* Do you have any questions?"

Berenice shook her head. "No. No questions."

"Then I assume that you still wish to become a lady of the stars."

She wanted to run away, and then she remembered that she *was* running away. She nodded. Numbly. Miserably. "Yes," she said.

The interviewer beamed. "Splendid!" he said. "Your rating on the aptitude test was very high, and Camellias, Inc., will be delighted to welcome you into its fold. . . ."

"So you want to be a spaceman," the captain of the *Perseus* said. "What makes you think that stowing away on board my ship is going to help you?"

"Well," Cross said, "you can't very well take me back to Earth, so you'll have to do something with me, and I understand that most ships are short-handed."

"Maybe I can't take you back to Earth personally, but I can throw you in the brig till we reach our first port and *send* you back to Earth. And you wouldn't be able to get out of the quarantine area as easily as you got in, I can assure you of that. You'd be stuck there for the rest of your life as a longstarman."

"Not if I stowed away on another ship," Cross said.

The captain glowered at him for a moment, then: "Why in hell didn't you apply for a berth legally?"

"I couldn't raise the bond," Cross said.

"You mean you were too impatient to go to work long enough so that you could raise it, don't you?"

"That's about the size of it . . . I understand that ship masters have ways and means of getting around such matters."

A dark cloud settled on the captain's face and for a while it looked as though a storm were going to break. Presently, however, the sun broke through and the cloud faded away. "It so happens that I *am* short-handed," he said. "In the galley."

Cross brightened. "That's all right," he said. "I've got to start somewhere."

"Report to Obronski on the

after deck . . . Ever operate a refuse disposal unit?"

"No, sir."

"You'll learn. . . ."

"For God's sake," the drunken space marine said. "You act like you never saw a real he-man before. You afraid of me, or something? Come on, smile!"

Her shoulders had touched the wall of the convent's recreation room, and she knew she could delay no longer. She forced herself to relax, forced a warm smile to her lips. "No," she said softly. "I'm not afraid."

The space marine's eyes grew more glazed than ever. "Thash good," he said. "Thash what I wanted to hear." He stepped closer to her, his arms outstretched, his face grotesque with lust.

She waited till he had nearly touched her, then she moved in without warning, brought her knee up sharply and, when he doubled forward, chopped him viciously on the back of the neck with the edge of her palm. He dropped, writhing, to the floor, and she proceeded to kick him deftly with her pointed shoes. She did not stop till he lay still, till the tips of her shoes were crimson, and then she stood, sick and trem-

bling, in the harsh fluorescent light.

"Excellent!" the female instructor said, entering the room. "A splendid performance, Berenice. It may seem cruel, at first, to employ real victims in our exercises, but there's no other way to learn how to defend yourself effectively—and beasts like this marine here are just the sort of creatures that forget, in their drunkenness, the inflexible rules of our profession, and the sanctity of a lady of the stars. We did not invite him here, you remember. We merely left the force-fence deactivated long enough for him to enter of his own accord, the door ajar, the light burning, so he could see it."

Berenice shuddered. She saw the ecstatic expression on the instructor's ancient, raddled face and she remembered that she herself would be an instructor some day—or a house-mother or a liaison lady—when her beauty had dimmed and her flesh had lost its firmness and not even the lowliest longstarman would want her. She shuddered again. "Isn't— isn't that an invitation, in a way?" she asked.

"Of course not!" the instructor said. "Come, we'll call his ship and have him removed. He should be sober by

the time he gets out of sick bay—if he ever does. . . ."

"But where are the monsters?" Cross asked, leaning over the rail of the observation platform and gazing across the tarmac.

"There's a settlement of them on the other side of the mountains," Obronski said. "They're not permitted inside the port area."

"And we're not permitted outside—"

"That's right. So forget about them."

"But there must be some way to see them."

"Sure, there is. If you had your own ship you could land near the settlement. But the port authority would be pretty tough on you if you got caught. Besides, why should you want to see them? I know I wouldn't."

"I guess I wouldn't either," Cross lied.

He lowered his eyes, idly watched the payload of fallen ladies of the stars filing out of the lock, accompanied by their lovers.

"I keep wondering," Obronski said. "You'd think they'd have more sense."

"Who?"

"The ladies of the stars, who else? They've got the whole galaxy at their finger-

tips and they go and let some space bum knock them up! Why?"

"Maybe they fall in love," Cross said.

"Love!" Obronski spat. "You've got a lot to learn, boy, even if you did make Second Mate on your fourth run. There's no love in space, and the only woman you'll ever have is the one you've got money enough to pay for!"

"Sure, I know," Cross said. He raised his eyes from the gangplank, looked out across the tarmac to where the rumpled hills formed green and purple preludes to the majestic line of mountains. I wonder what they're really like, he thought . . . Some day I'll find out.

"The Plenipotentiary from New Jericho presents his compliments, my lady," the house-mother said. "He was quite intrigued by her ladyship's film sequence and begs the honor of her company."

"For how long?" the Lady Berenice asked wearily.

"For tonight only. He is leaving WineWomanandSong in the morning."

"Very well."

The house-mother withdrew, and after a moment the Lady Berenice heard

the lift door sigh closed. She sat down to wait, wondering if she would hate this one as much as she had hated all the others, if she would hate herself tomorrow as much as she had hated herself on all the other tomorrows.

Presently, she heard the lift door sigh open, and then footsteps in the corridor. The knock—

She got up and opened the door. The Plenipotentiary from New Jericho was in his late nineties; toupéd, and refurbished to pass for a man of fifty. He was a far cry from the Emperor of the Universe.

The Lady Berenice repressed a shudder. "Come in," she said. . . .

New Tokyo was off the beaten path of the regular runs, but his new job with Falcon Lines took him to many of the out of the way places. He walked through the narrow streets of Rakuen, past the tile façades of the enchanting houses, past the foyers where the mama sans sat, wearing their timeless smiles. Pretty kimonoed girls leaned out over low balconies, laughing down with starlight in their hair.

He remembered a passage he had read a long time ago,

when he was a cabin boy on the *Perseus*, and he welcomed the words into his mind, let them flow softly through his thoughts—

I am lonely with the loneliness that comes to all men in womanless ships, whether they be ships at sea or ships in space; and if there be no woman to greet me when my ship reaches continent or planet, then I shall be lonely beyond all loneliness, beyond all capacity to endure . . .

A girl standing on the balcony just above caught his eye, perhaps because of the way the starlight touched her face, perhaps because of her wistful smile. He paused in the street, in the cool night, looking up at her. Her hair was black, and deftly piled into an elaborate coiffeur. Her eyebrows made him think of birds in flight. She touched her breast. "Hisako," she said softly, and he went back to the foyer he had just passed and told the mama san whom he wanted.

She could tell by the coldness of her cheeks that her face had gone white, and she could tell by the look in the examiner's eyes that it would be futile to protest his indictment, that no matter what she said, Gomorrah was going

to be her next—and last—port of call.

But the charge was so monstrous, so untrue, that she *had* to dispute it. "You must be mistaken," she said. "I can't possibly be—be that way!"

"Who is your lover?" the examiner asked coldly.

"But I have no lover. I'm trying to tell you that. I've always used my field!"

The examiner shrugged. "Be a fool and protect him then, if you want to. I should think, though, that you'd want to expose him, that you'd want him to share the responsibility."

"But I'm *not* protecting him. There simply isn't any such person. You *must* be mistaken, or else my field is defective."

"I've been in this business a long time," the examiner said. "I don't make mistakes. And I've never heard of a defective field." He opened the door. "Book passage to Gomorrah for the Lady Berenice and confiscate her C-field," he told his assistant. "And put her in custody till her ship leaves."

"Passage for one?"

The examiner looked at the Lady Berenice. "Well?"

She returned his gaze defiantly. "One," she said.

The evangelist had set up his portable pulpit just out-

side the spaceport, and Cross wandered over to the fringe of the crowd to listen. The *Pandora* didn't have clearance till tomorrow, and his passenger wouldn't be coming on board till shortly before blast-off. In a way, he was glad of that. He had always felt guilty about escorting fallen ladies of the stars to Gomorrah, and this time it would be worse, for, on his last stop there, he had visited the settlement beyond the mountains and seen the monsters . . .

The evangelist was an emaciated young man with dark, tortured eyes. As he talked, he waved his arms and paced back and forth. The night sky of Thais arched incongruously above him, and the ithyphallic structures of Wine-Women and Song formed an ironic backdrop for his imprecations.

"They brazenly walked the streets of Earth, and now they brazenly walk the streets of the new worlds—and you, you scum, you dregs of humanity, fawn at their feet like dogs, waiting for their meretricious favors, waiting for the contemptible privilege of spending your hard-earned dollars in order to experience the appetites they feed but never satisfy—"

"How do *you* know?" someone in the crowd shouted.

There was a scattering of laughter, but the evangelist continued, unperturbed: "I tell you that happiness does not lie in such lascivious pursuits, that nothing but misery can result from consorting with the ladies of the stars! They have come to you, not to heal your loneliness, but to deprive you of your earnings, your respect, your—"

"But at least they came!" the heckler shouted again. "That's more than you can say for the women sitting self-righteously in their suburban houses back on Earth, patting themselves on the back for having given birth to the children they were afraid *not* to have!"

"But let me ask you this," the evangelist said, singling out his antagonist and pointing at him with his finger. "*Why* did they come?"

"First I'll tell you why *we* came," the heckler answered. "We came because we were basically insecure and needed to prove to others that we were something more than they thought us to be, and thereby prove to ourselves that we are something more than what we really are. And yet, for all our bravado, we remain mere men, terrified, in

our hearts, of the abysses we claim to have conquered, alone, afraid, unwanted—Now is it wrong for a woman to feel the same as a man, to have the same frustrations, the same needs? And is it wrong if she fulfills herself in the only way modern society has left open for her, especially when by so doing she supplies a factor without which there could be no space travel, no raw materials for the stay at homes on Earth to turn into mechanical gadgets, ornate wigwams and four-wheel golden calves—”

“But they’re prostitutes!” the evangelist screamed. “Prostitutes!”

“Sure, they’re prostitutes—to you, and to the people on Earth. But to us, they’re women, the only women we can ever know, can ever have. And if you must have something to condemn, then condemn the prostitution corporations, for they, and they alone, are responsible for the cold, loveless efficiency of their products!”

“Prostitutes—”

An ugly murmur began in the crowd, rose swiftly into a roar. Cross felt himself being drawn into the maelstrom, heard his own voice blending with the voices of the others. He saw the whiteness of the

evangelist’s face, saw the silhouette of the descending police copter, and then the frightened figure on the shaking pulpit fumbling for the lowered rope ladder. When he was firmly secured on the ladder, and the copter was rising, the evangelist shook his fist at the mob he had created, shouting: “Armageddon is on hand, and every sinning one of you, every glorified street-walker and her lover, shall perish in the flames!”

There were some things you knew without quite knowing how you knew them, and the moment she had seen him standing in the lock of the *Pandora* she had known that he was the one.

But it was impossible, she had kept telling herself. Utterly impossible. And then, after escorting her to her cabin, he had mentioned *A Priori*, and she had remembered a spaceman telling her once that, in *A Priori*, almost *anything* was possible, and that, during an *A Priori* storm, *everything* was possible.

She still didn’t quite understand, standing in the shower now, the misted spray gently bombarding her skin. But she had acted, and would continue to act, on the assumption that

what the spaceman had told her was true, and on the additional assumption that the impossible would be less impossible if she cooperated with it. She felt perfectly justified in what she was doing and in what she intended to do: after all, even a monster was entitled to a father, and anyway, what was going to happen had already happened weeks ago.

"Yes?" she answered, when the knock sounded on the door.

"Your luggage, my lady."

She turned off the shower and wrapped the ship's towel she had selected earlier, around her body. Then she crossed the room and opened the door.

His eyes widened slightly at the sight of her, but his lean face remained impassive. "Set them inside, please," she said.

It was impossible for him to avoid touching her, and the contact, according to everything she had been taught, should have precipitated the first advance. It did not. He withdrew hurriedly, keeping his eyes averted.

"If you wish anything further, I'll be in my cabin," he said. He turned to go.

At first she was bewildered. Then, suddenly, she remem-

bered that he was only a pilot, and that a lady of the stars was probably as far beyond his aspirations as she was beyond his pocketbook.

Some of her recently acquired assurance left her. "Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

"How—how long will we be in *A Priori*?"

"A little over four hours, ship's time."

"Is—is there any likelihood of a time storm?"

"There's always a chance of a time storm," he said. "But don't worry, my lady. If the conditions for one are present, we'll be contacted by the port authority in time to avoid it."

"But suppose something should go wrong. Suppose we weren't informed in time and did get involved in one. What would happen then?"

He raised his eyes, finally, and looked directly into hers. An expression of surprise touched his face. Presently: "As you may know, my lady," he said, "*A Priori* is merely the result of the separation of pure space and pure time from the thing-in-itself, or from basic reality. Once separated, pure space can be contracted to the extent where a parsec equals .59 kilometers. Usually pure time contracts accordingly, but sometimes

there is a slight discrepancy, and certain phases of *A Pri-ori* contain more time than space. If we should become involved in one of these phases—or storms, if you like—we would lose our awareness of our objective reality and proceed to relive a subjective and sporadic playback of our pasts. So all that could happen to us, actually, are the things that have already happened to us—with the difference that we would relive not only our own experiences, but one another's as well; in pure time, individuality does not exist."

"But wouldn't our objective reality be affected?"

He nodded. "It *could* be," he said, "since, in the absence of any real passage of time, it would be in temporal ratio to our involvement in our pasts, which might force it into a different time plane altogether."

She dropped her eyes. "Then—then in spite of what you said before, something could happen after all—something that hasn't happened before."

"I suppose so, my lady . . . Will that be all?"

"Yes—for now."

"I'll be in my cabin . . ."

After he had gone she closed the door but did not lock it,

then she let the towel slip to the floor and went over and lay down on the couch. He would be back, she knew—there was no other answer—and when he returned she would welcome him the way she had welcomed all the others—

No, not quite the same, she thought, frowning. He was, after all, the father-to-be of her child-to-be, her—her monster-to-be. But, child or monster, it was—would be—his flesh and blood as well as hers, and that, she realized suddenly, was something quite unique—and quite strangely wonderful.

She was disconcerted, at first, when the walls of the room began to shimmer, not because she had doubted that there would be a time storm, but because she had expected him to be in her arms when it broke. Then she remembered something else she had heard about time storms.

Like hurricanes, they had eyes. . . .

Cross stirred on the couch, sat up. The storm was over and gone. The Lady Berenice's eyes were closed. Her breathing was soft, almost imperceptible. Her face, bereft now of all the hardness and the cynicism civilization

had imposed upon it, was like a little girl's.

He knew her, now, almost as well as she knew herself—

And she—she knew him almost as well as *he* knew *himself*—

As he sat there, watching her, a feeling of tenderness he had never known before, came over him, and then he thought—But she's a lady of the stars—

And then—But she's a woman, too, the only kind of woman I can ever know, or have—the mother of my child-to-be—

And then—She tricked me. She knew, she must have guessed—

And then—No, she had no more free will, really, than I did. There is no free will in an *A Priori* storm, any more than there is decency or compassion or love in a civilization created and maintained by opportunists—

And then—But this—this may be love, and if it isn't love, could it not be turned into love, under the right circumstances, in the right environment—

On Gomorrah?—

"Gomorrah, my lady."

Her bags were packed and setting just inside the door. She picked one up and he took

the other. She was wearing a white morning dress, and her hair made him think more than ever of Martian maize, but her eyes no longer reminded him of the ice lakes of Frigidia. The ice lakes of Frigidia never melted . . .

She followed him down the spiral companionway to the open lock. He heard her gasp when she looked out over the unexpected vista of fields and farmhouses, of hills and woods and rivers. "But this can't be Gomorrah," she said. "Where—where's the space-port?"

"On the other side of the mountains," Cross said. "They will be coming for us soon, and we'll have to go back and go through all the red tape ports are noted for. But first, I wanted you to see the monsters."

She lowered her eyes to the fields surrounding the ship, her face pale. Presently he heard her gasp again, and then he heard the whirl of the children's wings and their gay morning laughter. "Why—why they aren't monsters at all," she said. She gazed wide-eyed at the sight before them.

"Their parents and their parents' parents are," Cross said. "At least in the eyes of the Earth Council and the prostitution corporations. But

then, I suspect that even a bluebird would seem like a monster to *tyrannosaurus rex* . . . You see, the mutation required three generations for completion—a possibility that the Earth Council failed to take into consideration."

"But why don't they take it into consideration now? Why should such a marvelous miracle as this be kept secret?"

"The corporation lobbyists ~~are a powerful group~~ and you can imagine what a development like this could do to their business. Not only that, I suspect that they have an inherent fear of angels. But it's only a matter of time before the Earth Council will

be forced to act, and in the meantime, the 'monsters' will have an opportunity to develop a society of their own."

The first Gomorrite, a pretty, blue-eyed girl with cupid-wings, landed lightly in the lock. "Welcome to Gomorrah," she said.

The Lady Berenice reached out and took her hand. "Why—she's adorable!"

"She is, my lady," Cross said. "All of them are."

"Stop calling me ~~my~~ lady!" Then: "Will—will my great-grandchildren look like that?"

"Our great-grandchildren will, my la— My—Berenice. . . ."

THE END



"No wonder nobody else was on this part of the beach . . . it's quicksand!"

Do you know a practical joker? Hate him?
Here's a good way
to get even.

LAST LAUGHTER

By ROBERT CHASE

THE instant their hands met, there was a sudden loud staccato buzz, and the thin, nervous-looking man jerked his hand back as if it had been bitten. He stepped back, rubbing his palm, and glared at the other man angrily. "Same old Larry," he murmured.

Larry, who was a heavy set man with curly black hair, laughed loudly and clapped the other on the shoulder. "You fell for it, kid!" he said, showing the spring-operated buzzer in his hand. "Still the same old Jim Sadler! Remember the time in school when I sent the principal that note, and I forged your handwriting? Oh God," he said, laughing. "Remember that?"

"Yes. I was nearly expelled for that."

"That's *right!* By God, that's right! I'd nearly forgotten that." He eyed Sadler appreciatively, enjoying their reminiscence. "Say, what are you doing in town?"

"I've been transferred," Sadler said. "I'm with the Consolidated Bank, you know, and the manager here—Phil Evans—is due to retire next year. I guess this is my break," he grinned. "In the meantime, I'll be in the accounting department."

"Well, how about that?" Larry said, looking the other man up and down. "Come to stay, huh? I'll have to get the welcoming committee out. Show you a good time. Well, you can count on me." He winked, and patted the pocket which held his hand buzzer. "This may be a dead-looking

burg, but I can make it jump."

"I'll bet you can," Sadler said. "But don't go to any bother on my account." He looked worried. "Please," he added.

"Aw, nuts," Larry said. He fished a package of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Look, where are you staying?"

"At the Regina Hotel," Sadler said. "Until I find a place." He took a cigarette from Larry's pack and lit it.

"Well, look, I'll pick you up at eight tonight and we'll do the town. How about it?" Larry asked. He was watching Sadler curiously.

"No. Sorry," Sadler said. "I've got to be careful about late hours and such. Doctor's orders." He patted his chest, and smiled weakly. "Bad heart murmur. I've got to avoid any kind of strain. I shouldn't even be smoking this cigarette, in fact." He puffed on it and inhaled cautiously.

"Aw, nuts. You'll outlive us all," Larry said, watching him. "I'll pick you up at eight."

"Uh-uh," Sadler said, shaking his head. Then, as he drew the cigarette to his mouth again, it exploded in his face. There was a loud bang and a puff of smoke, and Sadler jerked back, gasp-

ing. He dropped the cigarette, which was in shreds, to the sidewalk. Larry was roaring.

"Oh God!" he howled, slapping his thigh. "Oh my God, you should see the look on your face! It's priceless!"

Sadler leaned back against the wall of the building. His face was pale and he looked a little sick. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face with it.

"Oh, man," Larry said, his pudgy face beaming. "You all right? You look a little upset, boy. Something happen?" And he burst out laughing again.

"Look," Sadler said in a weak voice. "I can take a joke all right. But I just finished telling you about my heart. You shouldn't do things like that Larry."

"Aw, nuts. We all got to have a few laughs. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"No thanks," Sadler said. "Look, Larry, I've got some things to do. I'll see you around." He nodded, his face still pale and shaken, then turned and walked away. Larry stood watching him, shaking his head slowly, a grin still on his lips.

Three days later, Jim Sadler was picked up by the police and questioned. They'd received several telephone

reports from irate men who stated that either their daughters or their wives had been molested by this newcomer, Jim Sadler. They were quite surprised to see that he was a ~~shy~~ shy, ~~nervous~~ nervous little man; and this, coupled with a character reference from his employer, convinced them that the charges were false. When they started investigating the men who had made the phone calls, they found they couldn't locate any of them by the names they'd given. It was all just a practical joke, they decided. Jim Sadler agreed. But when they asked him if he had any idea who might have done it, he said no. "I wouldn't want to cause any trouble without being sure," he said. But the incident had obviously upset him. His face was strained and drawn-looking, the lines seeming deeper than usual.

The next time Larry and Sadler met, Sadler was eating supper alone in the hotel dining room. Someone tapped him on the left shoulder. He turned, but no one was there. When he turned to his right, Larry's face jumped out at him with a loud "Boo!" startling him so much he spilled some of his soup.

Larry laughed, and took a seat opposite him. "You're a

barrel of fun, boy," he said, beaming. "How's it going?"

Sadler wiped up the soup he'd spilled with his napkin, trying to maintain his dignity.

"Hello, Larry," he said. He ~~didn't say it~~ didn't say it with much enthusiasm.

"Say, anything wrong? You don't look so good."

"I'm a little tired," he admitted. He smiled. "Breaking into the new job, you know." Then he stopped smiling, and his face became drawn and strained again. "Also, some joker's been giving me a bad time—phoning reports to the police that I've been molesting women in the park."

"You!" Larry said, delighted. "Oh brother, that's a good one!" He laughed, then looked at Sadler slyly. "I wonder who could have done such a thing?"

Sadler lowered his eyes to his plate. He hadn't eaten anything since Larry had arrived.

"What are you here for?" he asked, not looking up.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Larry said. "Just dropped in to see how you're getting along." He stood up. As he left, he patted Sadler on the back. "You won't find this place dull!" he promised. Sadler winced.

One week later, Mr. Evans called Sadler into his office. He showed him a letter he'd received, saying that Sadler was an alcoholic and could not be a worthy successor to the managership of the bank. The letter was unsigned.

Sadler denied the charge vehemently, and he said he strongly suspected that this was another practical joke, like the reports to the police earlier. Mr. Evans agreed that it was either a joke or a crank letter; but he said that, despite the injustice in it, the bank could not afford to have as manager a man about whom vicious rumors were circulating. He said there might be other such letters going to the important tradespeople in town. Whether or not they were true, they must be stopped—or the bank could not possibly consider giving Sadler the job. It was simply a matter of business.

Sadler told Mr. Evans he would look after it, and he left. But he did not know what to do. He worried about it for the rest of the day, getting hardly any work done. Then, at five o'clock, he telephoned Larry.

As usual, Larry was full of cheer. "Good to hear from you, pal," he said. "What's up?"

"Larry, I've got to talk to you. This is pretty serious." Sadler hoped his voice didn't betray his uneasiness. He didn't know how to deal with Larry. He never had, since the early days when they were in school together, and Larry had always picked him as the butt of his jokes and pranks.

"Look, Larry, can I see you tonight?"

"Sure thing, pal, what's the trouble? You haunted? Say, that reminds me—you found any ghosts in that room of yours yet? It really is haunted, you know. A guy died in that room."

"No, Larry, it's something else. When can I see you?"

"I don't know. You name it."

"Eight o'clock?"

"Okay. Drugstore across from the hotel, all right?"

"Fine. I'll see you there."

They hung up.

Larry was peering in through the window of the hotel when Sadler came down the stairs. He watched Sadler leave his key at the desk, then head for the door. Larry sank back into the shadows, holding his parcel close to him. When Sadler had crossed the street and entered the drugstore, Larry ducked into the

hotel. He walked up to the desk.

"Jim Sadler and I are going out tonight—he's just making a phone call now—and he asked me to leave this up in his room. Would you give me his key? Room 7."

The clerk handed him the key, and Larry climbed the stairs hurriedly. Inside Sadler's room, he switched on the lights, found the mirror behind the door, then opened his parcel and took out several tubes of theatrical make-up. He applied the colors to his face—deep black under his eyes, white on his lips, luminous green on eyelids and temples—until he had made a horrible death mask of his face. He grinned at himself in the mirror—it was a ghoulish grin—then turned off the light and hid in the closet to wait.

About ten minutes later, Sadler could be heard climbing the stairs. He stopped for a moment outside his room, then pushed the unlocked door open. He walked in, switched on the light, then went to the chair and sat down. He took out a cigarette and lit it.

He sat quietly for several minutes, smoking his cigarette. Finally he stood up and, as if a thought had occurred

to him, walked over to the closet. He put his hand on the knob to open it. Larry was ready.

As soon as the door came open, Larry let out a blood curdling scream and toppled forward out of the closet. He reached his hands out towards Sadler, who was falling away from him, and grasped him by the throat. Together, they fell on the bed. Before Sadler could recognize who it was, Larry pulled a sheet over his face, blinding him, and then dashed out of the room.

Sadler was lying on the bed, clawing jerkily at the sheet over his face. The sheet slid off. His face was contorted in agony. The eyes were opened very wide and staring up at the ceiling. They did not move or blink, but held rigidly still, as if paralyzed—the only movement was in the eyelids, which were fluttering slightly.

His body was lying crookedly on the bed, and his legs were kicking, knocking his feet about on the floor, as if he were trying to get up. He kept his hands clutched to his chest, just over his heart.

Finally he rolled off the bed and was on his knees on the floor. Rising to his feet was an agonizing effort; his mouth wrenched open in pain,

and saliva was running down his jaw. When he was standing up, he moved towards the door; then out to the stairway.

"Oh my God," the desk clerk said, looking up at him. He watched the figure poised grotesquely at the top of the stairs, trying to make the first step down, trying with a certain determination, as if it must go someplace, must find something. The clerk wondered for a moment if the figure was trying to follow the other strange, ghoulisn creature who had just run out the door a minute or so earlier. Then the figure lurched, and toppled headlong down the stairs, helplessly. The body banged and crashed its way down, knocking against the railing, until it reached the bottom. The clerk rushed over to it. It was lying quite still now. The head was twisted at an impossible angle on the neck, and the eyes, staring upwards, were lifeless.

"Oh God above," the clerk whispered. "It's Mr. Sadler. Dead."

Back at his apartment, Larry washed the make-up off his face. He was still chuckling to himself. When he had got the make-up off, he sat down at his desk—and after a

moment or two he took out a piece of paper and a pen. He began writing sample signatures on the paper, trying now one style of writing, now another.

After a few minutes, he stopped and looked behind him, as if there were someone watching over his shoulder. Then he shrugged, and went back to his practicing.

A few seconds later, he stopped and looked around again. He peered around the room; yet everything was in order, everything was as it always was.

He kept very still, and listened. But there was no sound, except for his own breathing, and his own heart-beat.

He shrugged again, and turned back to the desk.

He signed the name "Phillip Evans." It looked good; and this would probably come in handy some time. Just below it, he signed, in a different handwriting, "James Sadler."

He shivered then, and got up to close the window. He found the window already closed. He whirled around, and looked very carefully at every detail of the room. Nothing was changed. Except, perhaps . . .

Moonlight was streaming in through the window and it

fell, in the rectangular shape of the window frame, on the door to his closet. This made the closet door shine and stand out from everything else. Did the moonlight always land there? Larry stood quietly, staring at the closet door, as if he could look through it and see what was standing inside, waiting. He stood that way for several minutes.

Finally he went back to his chair, moving very quietly and cautiously, and keeping his gaze fixed on the closet door. He sat down, facing the door.

Perhaps because he had stared so hard at it for so long, the door seemed to be slightly more open now than it had been. Then he looked at how it fitted in the jamb, and saw there had been no change. Again, he shrugged. But he did not turn back to the desk.

He cleared his throat. The sound was surprisingly loud, but it seemed reassuring. But in a moment, the deathly si-

lence filled the room again, and Larry made no further sounds.

With sudden determination, he stood up, walked to the closet door, and flung it open.

He gasped, "No." But he could not move away.

The figure in the closet took a step forward. The face was contorted, the eyes bulging out, and it had a look of terrific strain on it. The mouth was pulled open; and the lines in the face cut deeply into the flesh, which was bloodlessly pale, dead. As it lurched forward from the closet, the mouth seemed to curl up in a hideous laugh.

Larry opened his mouth, but now he could not even speak. He stood still, frozen, as the figure drew up to him silently and reached up for his throat. He stared fascinated at the face as it began to bob up and down in laughter—laughter which was utterly soundless—and the icy cold fingers tightened on his throat.

THE END

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FISH TALK

By WINSTON K. MARKS

Some fishermen are always complaining about the one that got away. Our hero in this hilarious spoof has more than that to gripe about. His fish not only gets away, but shafts his mouth off about it.

YOU know, everybody in Southern Oregon claims that the Rogue River is lousy with salmon, steelhead and rainbow. I'll agree that it's got some mighty pretty fishing holes, only I've never been able to pick the ones that the fish do.

That's why I designed this fish-spotter, a rig I dreamed up when I was a Sonar-Radar technician in the navy. Much as I enjoy fishing, I like catching one once in a while even better. I figured that if I could test out these beautiful holes beforehand, my weekend trips might get me something more than fresh air and exercise.

So I headed up-river toward Union Creek Camp this particular Sunday morning with my newly finished spotter beside me in my quivering

jealopy, a song in my heart and a scientific gleam in my eye. No more of this hit-or-miss stuff for me.

It was a full, beautiful dawn when I picked out a section of sugar pine forest and drove off into the bushes where no one would likely see the car and follow me. I wanted to be alone.

One thing about the Rogue, almost anywhere you hit it, it looks fabulously fishable. It's full of riffles and eddies and rugged rapids and pleasant little falls with deep pools and interesting backwaters.

Well, I broke out of the brush right over a honey of a little fall where the river had cut a gorge, and the pool at the bottom looked deep. Some forty feet downstream it shallowed out into choppy rapids.

I scrambled down the bank to the stony shore and stood there breathing in the early morning dewey smell and the drifting spray from the bubbling white water at the foot of the fall. In spite of a thousand disillusionments, these moments are the high points of my life. You know the saying, about anticipation and realization?

There just had to be fish in this hole!

I put on my earphones, turned on the gear, which hung from my neck like a Brownie camera, and chucked the sounding knob out to the end of its ten feet of cable. It sank into the clear, green water, and I upped the volume control.

Nothing but a faint hash in my phones!

I just couldn't believe that this piscatorial paradise was that deserted, so I stuck together my fly-rod, tied a gray-hackle on the end of a half-pound-test leader and was quite ready to make a liar out of my own fish-detector, when a steelhead long as my arm did it all by himself.

He erupted from the surface practically at my feet, danced on his tail while he looked me over and then smashed back like a log, spat-

tering my waders with the splash.

Men and fish are perverse.

I knew he'd seen me. I knew I had the wrong kind of a fly on for a steelhead. I knew that the half-pound leader holding that fly was meant for a trout, not a lunker of a steelhead. And I could visualize the sad wreck he could make of my slender wisp of bamboo if I hooked him.

So, breaking all the rules, I cast out anyway. And the mammoth steelhead, defying all common fish sense, split the surface instantly and gobbled the puny little gray-hackle.

Down he went, some 200 feet to the bottom with no argument from me. In the excitement of my incredible luck I'd forgotten about the earphones on my head and was tensing up on my rod, trying to coax in a little line when someone said very distinctly:

"I'll be a son-of-sucker! Hooked again!"

I was so startled I almost dropped my rod, twisting around to look behind me. Nothing but the brush and trees and boulders as far as I could see down-stream. The falls blocked my view to my right.

In wrenching around like this I fouled my reel in the cable of the fish-spotter. I said

aloud, nervously, "Dammit!"

Instantly the voice came again, "Dammit, yourself! This wasn't my idea." And my rod bent down so hard that the tip dipped into the water before I could release line.

It's a wonder he didn't break loose right then. A steelhead is a clever as well as powerful fish, and I was thoroughly befuddled. An extremely silly notion persisted in my head. That steelhead had sworn at me!

I fumbled for a remark that wouldn't sound too foolish to someone hidden in the bushes. I yelled down into the pool, "Come up here, you big lunker!"

I have known fishermen to talk to their fish, but I have never heard of a fish talking back. This one did. I was listening carefully with the earphones slipped off my right ear and the left one on.

The voice came back, "Come down and get me, you great big lard!" and my line sliced a huge oval around the pool.

The voice had come out of the left earphone!

I quit looking around for people and started peering down into the pool with forgivable curiosity. There were so many ripples and bubbles I couldn't see more than a few

feet deep. But he was down there, all right, keeping a dead strain on my rod as if I had ahold of the bottom.

This wasn't going to tire him out, so I pulled a trick an old timer had shown me. I dug out my jack-knife and rapped it smartly on the base of my rod. The vibrations were supposed to travel down the line and wiggle the hook in the fish's mouth making him become active. You can't wear out a quiet fish.

My left earphone said, "Ouch," and sure enough, up he came, geysering clean out of the water and staring me right in the eye. That hateful look he gave me shook me up a little, but I managed to whip up my long rod fast enough to keep a taut line on him. He hit the surface like an eggbeater, then, unaccountably, he sounded for the bottom again.

"Give it up," he said. "You can't horse me in with light gear like that. Go catch a trout somewhere!"

"Who wants to horse you in?" I said, suddenly realizing that I was actually talking to a fish. Before I could dwell on it, however, the argument was on.

"Well, if you think I'm going to cooperate, you're gonna be here a long time, bud."

"Come up," I commanded, and I rapped hard on my rod with my jack-knife.

"Stop that," he yelled in anguish.

"Then come up and make like a fish," I said.

He sank deeper instead, to show me who was boss. "Look, let's talk this over," he suggested. "You seem a mite smarter than the other yokels who hooked me. I've cussed out a lot of fishermen in my day, but how come *you* can understand my lingo?"

Well, I wasn't going to be tricked into tipping him off about the fish-spotter. His contemptuous tone and calm decision to reduce a magnificent battle to a cheap dicker infuriated me.

I pointed out, "You aren't in a position to ask questions and bargain. You are the largest piece of fish-flesh I have ever tied into, and I'm here to fish, not bicker. If you want free, get to work. You'll never get hung up on lighter fishing gear than this." I knocked on the rod some more.

He came up a little with each knock, yelling, "NO, NO! Stop! So okay, it's a light rod. Why knock off the varnish?"

"I'm here for sport, not arguments," I repeated.

"Sport!" he sneered. "You call murder sport?"

Non-fishermen have advanced this point before to no avail, but the steelhead made it sound strangely convincing. "What chance," I demanded defensively, "did you give all those little trout that you ate? Was that sporting?"

"Small fry," he scoffed. "Not worth mentioning." I rapped hard, and he boiled about the surface for a moment, then he sank to the depths again muttering to himself, "Slow down, big boy. Don't be a fool! That's what he wants you to do."

I kept on rapping on the rod, and he finally yelled at me with furious candor. "You're driving me nuts!"

"Looks like you can't take it," I taunted. He eased up to the surface slowly trying to take the strain off and cussing me every quart of the way.

Darned if he didn't surface, but just beyond my net. Then he swam off a bit and doubled back on me, which forced me to drop my knife and take in line in a hurry to keep from giving him dangerous slack. He moved up almost within reach of my net again, and I didn't like the way he was hooked through the lip. His scarred jaws showed where other hopefuls had snagged him. One good shake of his

head with loose line and he'd be off.

He circled away from me again, and back he rushed. Then I realized that this was deliberate strategy to keep me too busy to torture him with the rapping.

"Hah!" he said, "I can do this forever."

"So can I," I lied.

"Don't try to fool an old river fish," he sneered. "You have to clear out an hour after sundown, and you know it."

I said nothing, and he must have sensed that he had me. "Tell you what I'm going to do," he said with a flip of his dorsal fin. "We larger fish generally stick pretty well together, but under the circumstances I think I'm entitled to do a little stooling. After all, it's my life or theirs, maybe."

"Whose life?" I suckered.

"Those trout. Those eighteen-inchers up in the next pool, just above the falls. There are nine of them up there, big fat fellows on their way down to Hell's Gate country. They were the only sizable fish I passed on the way down here. I heard them say they were holing up until dark to wait for the females to catch up to them. The ladies had a little business up-stream and fell behind."

I caught my breath. Eight-

teen-inch rainbows! I've often dreamed of catching such fish, but a 12-incher has been my top fish in the past. And nine of them!

But I was leery. "Why should I turn loose a 24-inch fish to go after—"

"I'm 26 inches, fellow, and don't you forget it," he interrupted sharply. "And if you were going to pull that old saw about a bird in the hand, don't bother. I've tried to demonstrate that I am not in your hand by a long shot." To prove it he slogged down to the bottom again.

"If I turn you loose," I asked suspiciously, "how do I know you won't swim up there and alert them?"

He rose to the surface, rolled over on his silvery side and gaped open his mouth. "On my gill's honor I won't," he swore solemnly.

He gave a little impatient splash and egged me on. "Of course, you aren't going to take them standing here playing tic-tac-toe with me all day. There's a mighty fine afternoon's fishing up there. I'd suggest you make your first cast just below the mossy rock at the lower end of the pool and play them down this way. You might get all of them that way, if you don't make them

suspicious. In fact, judging from the shrewd way you have, ah, inconvenienced me, I'd say your chances were excellent."

Well, I guess I got to dreaming too much about those nine rainbow, because I let the bend go out of my rod.

Instantly, he broke water high in the air, got the slack he needed and shook the hook loose. Then he circled right at my feet and sent a splash of cold water all over me with his tremendous tail. "Hah! I told you you couldn't hold me," he gloated gleefully.

I could have sat down and cried, but I didn't let on. "What do you mean?" I said. "You made me a bargain, and being a sportsman I kept my part by letting you off. After all, I did come out here to fish for rainbow. So, thanks for tipping me off about the upper pool," I added with what dignity I could muster.

"Don't mention it," he replied sarcastically.

Well, he'd made up my mind for me, so I stripped off the earphones and the sling attached to the spotter, and I climbed the rocks alongside the falls. There was the pool, just as the steelhead had described it, mossy rock and all.

Then my last hope curdled.

The pool was only about two feet deep, and clear as a mill pond. No game fish in his right mind would hesitate in that exposed water for ten seconds.

Mad? I threw down my rod, grabbed up a knobby tree branch for a club and scrambled back to the lower pool with murder in my eyes.

"How's fishing?" the steelhead asked, his gills fluttering with hysteria.

I picked up the fish-spotter, case, earphones and all and heaved it at the big brute, then I swung that tree limb and launched myself out at him.

Naturally, I was no match for him in his own element. My waders filled up and I almost drowned before I managed to struggle down into the shallow rapids where the water was only hip deep. And the damned steelhead kept circling me and slapping water in my face all the way to shore.

The last I saw of him he disappeared around the bend in the river.

I didn't even dive for the fish-spotter. It's still soaking at the bottom of that pool, and it can stay down there for all of me. All it did was prove one thing.

Fish are just as big liars as fishermen.

THE END

ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

(Continued from page 7)

Your publication has a fine name—*Fantastic*. I believe that I, along with numbers of fellow humans expect and get just those kind of stories when we buy your magazine. I wouldn't want it any different. If a few people are so ostensibly educated that they cannot bend their great minds to the abstract, let them contain themselves with reading a written account of Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

Kenneth P. Shingara
Shamokin, Pennsylvania

• *Funny you should mention Einstein—we've just had several submissions from a man who says his name is Albert Einstein, and the stories are all about relativity. But the return, self-addressed envelope was marked "Matteawan State Hospital," or something like that.*

Dear Editor:

Let me congratulate you. The September issue of *Fantastic* was the best for many a day. I especially enjoyed "Time Squeeze" as this is my favorite type of story, and I can always depend on E. K. Jarvis and Rog Phillips for delightful reading.

I have been an avid reader of science fiction for twenty years and have in my collection quite a few old magazines, so I know people are not feeling nostalgic when they write in to say that there were more good stories in the old *Fantastic Adventures* and other magazines than there are now. But, as I have said before, science fiction and fantasy change like everything else and I like the new kind too.

Phillip Farr
2930 Main Street
Kansas City, Mo.

• *A little bit of change is always healthy. But no long-time fan will ever forget the great stories of the past. What we're hoping to do is keep *Fantastic* a satisfying blend of what is good and new, along with stories on the great old themes by the great "old masters." Our motto is: FMMFS—"Fantastic Magazine Means Fine Stories."*

Dear Editor:

I liked the "Savage Machine." Something new and something different. If you'd put something new on the front covers now, for a change, I would not even know the same book.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Alabama

• *Well, we're thinking of something new on the covers. But, please, recognize it—otherwise how will you know which magazine to buy ?????*

Dear Editor:

About a week ago I became acquainted with your fine magazine. I browsed through it, marvelled at the good stories and superb illustrations, looked at the date of publication, which was 1951, and put it back in the shelf muttering, "they don't publish magazines like this any more." And that was that, until today when I saw your magazine on the stands. It was as good as the old except for one thing and here is the point of my letter. The illustrations are not half as good as they used to be. About six years ago, readers would write in offering to sell copies of the Finlay portfolio and now I find a reader accusing Finlay of becoming sloppier and sloppier. Many times it is the illustration that makes me want to read the story and a sloppy illustration makes me want to read it last or not at all. I hope to see a lot of good old type of Virgil Finlay illustrations in the future.

Arthur Gingrande
Herrick Road
Boxford, Mass.

• *We're concerned about the art work, too, and are always trying to make it better. We have some new artists working on ideas for future issues, and we also plan to have more by Finlay soon.*



~~NOTHING~~ BUT TERROR

By J. F. BONE

*A haunting story of a
man and his girl—but
not the kind of girl
you might think.*

IT SEEMED a long time since the last speeding car had roared past this spot where her man lay, bearing others who fled with mindless terror from the plague that was already gnawing at their vitals. She touched his unresponsive hand disfigured by confluent ulcers and discolored by the purplish cast of capillary hemorrhage. He looked asleep lying there against an angle of the wall, but she knew that it was the long sleep, the sleep from which there is no awakening. He was gone and the closeness, the love, the rapport were all gone with him and

in their place was nothing but stark loneliness.

The immensity of her loss was beyond words. All she could do was let her grief flow out in a wild paroxysm that echoed down the street with lingering reverberations as the sound reflected from the fronts of the buildings around her. They towered into the air, black against the setting sun, their cold window eyes glowing red with the reflection from the western skies and the uncontrolled fires raging in the suburbs.

She shivered as the sun vanished from sight and the cool air swept in from the bay.

To the east the moon rose above the jagged hills, a red bulbous moon that shattered the darkness with pallid light limning the tall buildings faintly against the speckled backdrop of a star studded sky.

The city was empty of the sound of man. No horns blew. No engines throbbed in their notes of muffled power. No voices livened the silent air. No whistles drowned the lapping noise of wavelets along the waterfront. But there were other sounds.

A dog howled at the rising moon.

An owl hooted mournfully from the upper reaches of one of the buildings.

The strengthening wind drove rustling shreds of paper before it through the deserted streets, piling them in grotesque heaps in sheltered corners, plastering them against stranded cars clogging the intersections.

The dog howled again and she responded to the pain in that thin voice whose agony was a mirror of her own.

And then the air was riven by the clatter of horny feet against the pavement as a band of cattle from the outlying stockyards rushed past, running with fear driven haste, crashing into cars and

lampposts, galloping noisily up the street, fleeing from the death that came behind.

Death came with a yelping rush,—a huge pack of dogs of all breeds and sizes. They ran at the cattle's heels, nipping at the laggards until one dog tired of the sport and leaped at the throat of the weakest laggard to bring it crashing to the earth.

In an instant the steer was smothered under a horde of hairy bodies and slashing jaws. A choked bawl of fear was silenced in the middle of its terror and drowned in a medley of growls and snarls as the pack fed. In an incredibly brief time the steer was gone save for some bits of hide and offal, and the dogs trotted off in little groups with only the faint click of their claws against the pavement to mark their passing.

Then from the wrecked fronts of the buildings, from the alleys and sewers came tiny rustlings as rats moved in to probe with quivering noses through the offal the pack had left behind. They came from all sides, creeping blobs of gray hunger lured by the scent of blood.

And out of nowhere, stalking them on silken feet came cats, lean flanked predators

moving silently in the shadows. The whispering night wind muffled their stealthy approach as they crept upon the swarming rodents who gnawed at the tattered shards of the dogs' abandoned kill.

Squalls of feline rage and triumph,—squeaks of pain and terror, rustlings and scramblings of pursuer and pursued made a faint diminuendo in the darkness, as an antiphony of predator and prey as clouds swept out of the west to hide the moon and rain fell to soak the littered streets, plastering the torn scraps of paper against steel and concrete, swaddling the city in wet wrappings of papier mache. The water trickled forlornly through choked gutters to drip into hollow gurgling storm sewers as the clouds swept past and the moon shone low and pale against the gray light of dawn.

The red headlines of a newspaper plastered against an overturned car stood out in stark relief against the growing light. The headline six inches high carried all the news that was important.

It contained only three letters and an exclamation point.

It read quite simply — — WAR!

And in the light of the new

day, she realized at last that there was no further need nor reason for her to remain. Stiffly she rose to her feet, looked down at her man, and then turned and walked slowly away . . .

The hospital was a charnel house, a grisly monument that poked a long fingered spire toward the sky, ~~— a symbol of hope that failed.~~ Men had come here for help and had remained to die. Hundreds of cots filled the wards and halls, each bearing a bloated burden of dissolution. The air was heavy with decay, a fetid miasma rank with the odors of decomposition. But in the midst of this carnival of death there was life.

There were the flies.

They clustered in black masses upon the walls and ceilings and upon the liquefying flesh of the dead, and the air swirled sluggishly to the beat of their myriad wings. A muffled drone augmenting and diminishing with uncertain rhythm echoed through the corridors of the dead as the flies sought the upper reaches of the halls for a warmer resting place to withstand the chill of approaching night.

But there were more than flies and maggots and the

corpses upon which they fed in this rat proof tomb of steel and concrete. Close to the ground a light gleamed in the growing darkness, a square of white that brightened as the night fell, a glow that shone from a barred window reflecting answering gleams from the eyes of a semicircle of dogs outside.

~~They~~ ~~watched~~ the man behind the bars, and ~~some re-~~ ~~membered~~ dully that here was what had once been their god. But that was no more. Man had deserted them and left them to shift for themselves. They owned this one no allegiance. To them he was merely food, hidden safely behind the iron rods that separated them.

Edward Falkland looked out at the ring of glowing eyes and cursed softly and monotonously. He fingered the pistol tucked in the waistband of his trousers as his sunken eyes scanned the room, checking its security for the thousandth time. The room, bright with the light from a Coleman lantern was his refuge,—his cave from which he could look with safety into the jungle outside.

He smiled grimly. The dogs were getting bolder, which meant that they were hungrier. One had even thrown

itself madly against the bars, foam dripping from its jaws as it tried to chew through the hardened steel and get at the man inside. It was a good sign. Soon hunger would drive most of them from the city, and it would be safe to venture outside again. It wouldn't be long now. Winter was near and the cold would help. He trimmed the lamp and stroked the pistol in his belt. ~~The light~~ ~~the gun~~ and the gun were his comforts in the grim hours of darkness. For like the dogs, he didn't sleep at night. Night was a time of wakefulness—of looking forward to the dawn when the dogs would leave and he could sleep. He feared and hated them, these stinking scavengers that fed upon dead and living alike.

The ghost of a smile touched his lips as he looked at the dogs outside. He was in the strongest position. The supplies in the hospital kitchen would last for years if necessary, and he could afford to wait.

They couldn't.

They had to eat, and there was no food here that they could reach. And in a few more weeks the flies and their maggots would remove the lure that brought them clustering to this place. He almost

felt grateful to the flies,—although he hadn't in that horrid moment of awakening when he had regained consciousness to find himself covered with them and surrounded by the dead in one of the upper corridors.

The flies had fled in terror as he moved, but their terror was no less than his. He too had fled, a slow crawling flight past the rows of bodies toward the cool green door at the end of the corridor that beckoned to him like a beacon of safety. That hundred foot crawl through corruption still haunted his sleep,—and even awake he could feel the sting of fear sweat upon his face and the gall bitterness of vomit in his throat as he recalled that endless journey.

But he had made it.

The door had opened into the Superintendent's office and there had been a water cooler there. Later he managed to find the kitchens with their enormous stores of food, and there he stayed, sleeping in the head dietician's quarters, gaining strength with nightmare slowness until he had recovered enough to venture outside.

That had been foolish.

He knew it now, but then he had merely been conscious that he was at last free of the

stink and corruption of the hospital. It did not surprise him that the city was dead. He had expected it. After all, biological and nuclear warfare shouldn't leave too many people alive upon a war wracked earth. It only surprised him that anyone, even the Pan Asians, would be fools enough to start something they knew that they couldn't finish.

But perhaps they were like the dogs,—too hungry for either fear or caution, and perhaps they looked with envy upon the scattered population and fertile lands of the West. Whatever it was, war had come and the first blow was the last. At the time he was certain that there would be some survivors, for no weapon, no matter how deadly it might be would be able to kill everyone.

At the time he didn't know about the dogs.

He walked nearly a half mile through the empty streets before he found a clothing store. The door was unlocked and he entered to change the stink of his hospital pyjamas for something cleaner and warmer. He took what he wanted, and as he stepped from the store his eyes caught the flicker of movement down the street,—

a movement that became four dogs walking toward him along the lines of silent cars parked at the curb. He sighed with relief. Dogs meant companionship if nothing else. He stepped out into plain sight and whistled. And the dogs came running.

A delighted grin split his lean cheeks. They seemed as glad to see him as he was to see them. A big Doberman led them, running close to the ground like a wolf, fangs bared, ears laid back. It didn't look glad,—deadly was a better word. Suddenly cautious, he stepped back into the store and closed the door in the dog's face.

The Doberman leaped and slammed through the glass to land scrabbling with blunt claws on the slippery tiled floor. That was the only thing that saved him. The brute was too eager. As it struggled for footing Falkland darted behind the counter looking for a weapon, and there by the grace of God lay a pistol. He picked it up as the dog regained its feet and leaped again. He shot even as the slashing fangs ripped across his left forearm, just as two of the following dogs leaped through the broken door. The bullet slammed the Doberman

across the room, dead before it struck the ground. The other dogs stopped, smelled the blood of their leader and paused uncertainly. He fired again. The shot missed, but the noise was too much. Tails tucked between their legs, they fled. They wanted no part of this living man. Too many memories of the Lords of Creation came rushing back to their hunger-crazed minds,—too many things that they had nearly forgotten. For Man was still the living god, and they knew better than to rouse his wrath.

Falkland stood gasping, bleeding from a six inch slash in his forearm, looking down at the dog he had killed. His strength was gone and he was weak with reaction. It was fortunate, he reflected wryly that the other dogs weren't trained manhunters like their leader. If they had been, he wouldn't have had a chance. But one thing was certain, he'd never trust another dog . . .

A grin of animal cunning twisted his lips. The time was coming when he'd teach those feral brutes a lesson they'd never forget. He'd show them who was master. It would take time, but he could afford to wait. He licked his lips with anticipation. He chuckled

shrilly, the chuckles blending into maniac laughter. Deliberately he walked to the window and threw it open, laughing as a hunger-maddened dog threw itself against the bars. He shot it and the others swarmed over their dead companion in an ecstasy of hunger,—and as they fed he laughed . . .

Winter came and snow drifted in the streets, but somehow she managed to survive. There was still food in the city,—and she found it,—foraging through the looted stores along the waterfront. And with the snow the scavengers departed. Most of the food was gone and what remained was hard to get. Occasionally she killed a dog who invaded the half mile square she considered hers and left its body in the streets to be devoured. But that was poor tactics. Rather than being a deterrent, the dead proved an attraction for their cannibalistic fellows.

So she began to search for a new territory constantly widening her travels,—until she reached the hills surrounding the harbor.

And then she found a special street. A full dozen frozen carcasses of dogs barred its

entrance, but she paid them no attention. She had seen dead dogs before, and they didn't bother her.

The street opened onto a broad avenue, white with snow and oddly clear of stranded cars. She looked down its length,—and stopped short,—shivering! For there, standing beside one of the tall buildings was a man,—a living man! A tall man who looked at her with the same astonished wonder that she looked at him . . .

The dogs kept Falkland sane. His hatred of them was the bright point that focused his reason. And with the onset of winter he began to teach them the promised lesson. The cold had reduced their numbers enough for him to risk taking one of the hospital ambulances on a short reconnaissance through the nearly impassable streets. A mile away he found a sporting goods store with a generous and relatively untouched stock of the supplies he needed. There were rifles, ammunition, — and traps, — strong steel traps that would hold the fiercest dog.

And Falkland smiled.

It didn't take long before the starvelings who remained realized that man had returned to claim his own,—

man the cunning,—man the God,—man the master of iron. Traps caught them in cruel jaws, poison racked their bellies, bullets drove life from them. The area around the hospital became a death trap. At almost any hour of the day or night unwary dogs entering it died. The lesson was quickly and thoroughly learned,—the grim law of survival that taught them if they would live they must avoid this place where man ruled again in all his power . . .

Falkland swore softly. He had only gotten one dog today, and that one a gaunt ribbed undersized mongrel shot as he gnawed at the frozen carcass of one of the earlier victims. He sighed. This area was becoming safe,—and dull.

A faint noise down the street made him look up. There in the middle of the road a big Great Dane looked at him, ears pricked and alert, tail wagging tentatively. He grinned thinly and raised his rifle. It had been a long time since he had seen a dog bold enough to look him in the face. They normally fled from him as though he was the Plague. He brought the telescopic sight to his eye and took up the slack in the trigger. The

dog leaped at him in the sight picture.

He paused. There was something about this one that was different. There was none of the bright eyed feral look of the others. This one neither ran towards him or away from him,—just stood there cropped ears pricked forward eyeing him with a curious look that held within it surprise more than anything else. And its tail was wagging.

On impulse he whistled. The dog took a tentative step forward, and then came on at a sidling trot. He lifted the gun again, half undecided, shocked at the unfamiliar sound his lips had made. With a start of surprise he realized that he hadn't whistled to a dog since the time he was attacked. He grinned bitterly, — possibly the dogs hadn't given him a fair shake, but he hadn't given them any better. He remembered more than one wagging tail and pleading look caught in his traps,—looks that he had callously snuffed out. He sighed and lowered the rifle. He'd see what this one would do.

The thin tail wagged briskly as the dog came forward, her whole expression one of apparent unwillingness to believe her eyes. She stopped some ten feet away, and eyed

him with cautious friendliness. He smiled an oddly gentle smile,—the poor girl was thin as a rail—even worse than the mongrel he had shot. Acting on impulse he stretched out his hand and called, "Here Lady! Come here girl! Come on, there's nothing to be afraid of, here Lady!"

He knew her name! The wonder of it staggered her! She shivered, her muscles suddenly weak as she heard the familiar word. He was a stranger, and she had been taught to distrust strangers, but in his voice she heard a hunger akin to her own . . . Whining softly she thrust her scarred muzzle forward, sniffing eagerly as his hand passed over her head to the sensitive spots behind her ears,—and scratched!

Her red tongue licked out. Here was the friend,—the god,—the protector she had sought. No longer did she feel alone. He would care for her, and love her, and she,—why she would return that love a thousand fold, as dogs had done since the beginning of time. She looked with bright happy eyes at the man who claimed her. He smiled at her,—and when he turned away she followed, trotting at his heels, head high, tail curved

proudly. It was nice to be respectable again . . .

A vagrant breeze blew dog scent to her nostrils. She growled deep in her throat, staring with jealous eyes into the alleyway from whence the odor came, — her hackles raised in a stiff brush along her back as she halted stiffly, teeth bared in a snarl.

The man eyed her suspiciously, his hand going to the pistol at his belt, but she ignored him, watching the alley mouth. There was a smell of carrion about the hidden dog, and she wondered dully why the man beside her couldn't sense it. A maneater lurked there in the shadow!

Falkland noted the cant of her head and realized that the bare toothed snarl was not for him. He whirled to face the alley, his rifle leaping up to be ready—but he was late. The maneater was already in midair, driving for his throat,—a huge Irish Wolfhound, grey and shaggy — larger even than the Dane that followed him. He had barely time to raise an arm to protect his throat before the dog was on him. But that leaping body never struck its mark.

A brindle thunderbolt brushed past him, striking the Wolfhound broadside. The bigger dog snarled as the

Dane's weight spoiled its leap. Amazement boiled in the hound's little mind as it twisted madly in midair to regain its balance, fell heavily to the pavement, slipped, rolled and scrabbled frantically with blunt claws against the snow covered concrete. It was still trying to rise as Falkland raised the rifle and drove a bullet through its brain.

Lady cowered at the sound of the gun, and whimpered as the man stood over her with the smoking rifle gripped in white knuckled hands.

"Life for a life," Falkland murmured softly. "It's balanced."

She was afraid, but the fear became a wild surge of joy as he knelt beside her murmuring soft words into her ears, with tender hands. It was all right. Everything was all

right, she had again found the symbiosis she had lost. She was whole again.

Falkland felt a tightening of his throat as he looked at her and read the message in her eyes. Here was the companionship, the love and loyalty he needed to make him complete.

He laughed—and this time it was a happy sound. Together they could do anything. They would find others,—other men and other dogs that still loved men, and together they would rebuild the civilization that had been so nearly lost. He knew it with a bright certainty. His head lifted with confidence as he rose to his feet.

He moved briskly and beside him, already sensitive to his mood, the Dane's pacing turned to a jaunty cakewalk.

THE END



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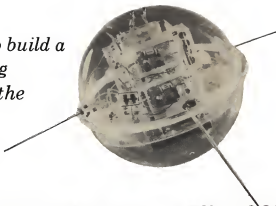
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